

Jewish Vaccines Against Mimetic Desire: René Girard and Jewish Ritual

Submitted by Vanessa Jane Avery to the University of Exeter
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ABSTRACT

In 1972, with the publication of *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard makes the stunning assertion that violence is the foundation of culture. Humanity's innate urges for competition and rivalry entrap us in cycles of violence, which left alone would find no resolution. Girard calls the cause of this rivalry "mimetic desire", and the only way out of this deeply embedded vengeance is to create a scapegoat to take the blame, reconciling the conflicting parties. Girard asserts that the biblical texts uniquely reveal the mechanisms of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, and even demystify sacrificial rituals as nothing more than sacralized "good" violence to keep a fragile peace. This revelation, according to Girard, can finally allow us to remove violence from the sacred.

Much scholarship has been devoted to Girard's theory, in particular how it offers a viable alternative to the still-dominant sacrificial theology of the cross. But there is little scholarship on the connection between Girard and Judaism; and Girard's own work leaves us with a picture of Judaism that is at best incomplete, and at worst unable to find an answer to disturbing violence permeating the scriptures. This dissertation brings the Hebrew Bible into dialogue with Girard's ideas in a systematic fashion to assert, contra Girard, that the Jewish revelation is a full, effective and even practical expression of his theory. After an overview of Girard's work in the first chapter, the dissertation examines three Jewish "vaccines" to the mimetic disease as follows: the *Birkhat ha-Banim* ("The Blessing of the Children"); the reading of the Book of Esther on Purim; and the reading of Jonah on *Yom Kippur*.

The conclusion to the dissertation asserts, drawing on these three demonstrations, the following points: 1) Rene Girard gives an important and clarifying lens to aid us in finding a new way to talk about, understand, and unify Jewish scripture and ritual; 2) a Jewish perspective can help flesh out what a different "revelation" of Girard's mimetic desire looks like—even providing prescriptions to curtail this desire; and 3) positive mimesis is possible, and there are Hebrew examples of it free of originary violence. The final chapter addresses certain challenges in reconciling Girard with Judaism, moving toward a sincere Jewish Girardianism that will harmonize with the central views of the tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 20th, 2013, I attended a conference called “Sacred Texts, Human Contexts”—an interfaith conference devoted to research and reflection upon how sacred texts both unite and divide humanity. At the conference, Rachel Mikva, former Rabbi and Professor of Jewish Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary, commented on one principle of interfaith studies that she finds of crucial importance. This principle was the need for each religion involved in dialogue to not only bring their standard texts into the conversation, but also those that they found troublesome—the texts, let’s say, that have been the thorns of one’s tradition—the ones the people, and even history has found impossible to fully affirm. The importance of exposing one’s textual vulnerability in dialogue makes an enormous difference in human relations in general; it displays our willingness to step out of our comfort zone. Bringing our troublesome texts into dialogue may expose our tradition, and even us, to criticism. Sharing from these places of vulnerability, and across faith lines, though, typically has an opposite effect. It allows all of us together to acknowledge the lingering questions about the universe and ourselves that evade our wisdom. The multiple voices of faith, together, searching out these troublesome texts from varied points of view, bring a spectrum of light into our understanding. In our shared and vulnerable space, we sit in our full humanity, and even possibly channel divinity.

Mikva continued that in the many decades of dialogue with Christians in the classroom, she has asked of her students which text(s) they would bring to the table, and she reported that they always cite an Old Testament text. With a smile and a laugh, she admits that she finds it an annoyance that her own sacred texts are always the ones singled out. So she requests that her students find a text from within their own Testament, while fully accepting of the fact that many

texts are indeed called forth as difficult from the Hebrew Bible, and eager herself to bring the most difficult from her own lot.

In reflecting on Mikva's words near the completion of this dissertation, I must admit that there are few texts that are *not* troublesome in my own Hebrew Bible. Whether we speak of the blame cast in the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel, the Binding of Isaac, the woes of Job, the Purim massacre, the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael, the resistance of Jonah, or the expulsion of Vashti, our texts depict a violence that perhaps humans might prefer not to confront. But is this violence something we can call "sacred"? Is it from God? Is it *of* God? In at least some cases we find the text criticizes the violence it presents, but this is not always so. What are we to make of this? Is violence a part of this world we are meant to accept? Is violence connected to the divine? These are certainly some of the questions that prompted the writing of this dissertation.

Several different approaches to addressing the conspicuous violence in the biblical texts have surfaced, especially since the 1980's. Phyllis Trible's famous *Texts of Terror* is a feminist classic¹—her book specifically dealing with "sacred" violence against women in the Hebrew Scriptures. She focuses on four texts that raise, in her own words, a "theological challenge" to the faith of Israel in their inhumane and at times deeply violent treatment of women from within a patriarchal structure. Her chapter on Hagar, for example, depicts Hagar as a foreshadowing of Israel "through contrast." Trible explains that Hagar represents all that Israel may be terrified of:

She experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return...This Egyptian slave woman is afflicted for the transgressions of Israel.²

¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

² *Ibid.*, 28.

And yet despite her circumstances, Hagar is “a pivotal figure in biblical theology” for her receiving an annunciation and divine promise. Tribble deals effectively with the darkness of human actions and choices, and the human need to integrate the “others” in our midst. Tribble’s main contribution is in her ability to let the text be as it is without squeezing it into a context that might provide a less disturbing conclusion. Hagar is “the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth...the homeless woman...”³

Tribble speaks loudly to remind us not to forget our victims. Hagar, in short, is right in our midst, before our eyes. Perhaps we *are* Hagar. She may well represent not just the greatest fear of Israel as Tribble declares—of being without God’s protection and covenant—but the greatest fear of woman—single womanhood, a mother unable to quench her child’s thirst, left alone to watch her beloved son die. Tribble seeks to bring comfort in the midst of these very uncomfortable stories by squaring them with the sadness that does often permeate the human experience. Tribble does not offer the even more uncomfortable idea, however, that perhaps we are also Sarah. Perhaps we are the one who commits the violence.

Reuven Firestone is another active voice in the movement to understand violence in the Abrahamic traditions, offering an informed historical and political perspective of the violence found in the Hebrew Bible, a good compliment to Tribble’s rhetorical critical analysis. Firestone responds to the violent texts in the *Tanakh* by locating biblical Judaism, including its violent and vengeful texts, inside of a historical time period in which Jews held some political power. Firestone postulates that it is within this context that the Jews used violence to ensure the status quo and their position of power. In his article entitled “Judaism on Violence and Reconciliation: An Examination of Key Sources,”⁴ Firestone contrasts the biblical era in which Jews could be victors (and often were), with the Rabbinic period following the destruction of the Second Temple—an era

³ Ibid.

⁴ Reuven Firestone, “Judaism on Violence and Reconciliation: An Examination of Key Sources,” in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. James Heft (NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), 74–87.

when Jews (and also Christians) were under the impenetrable domination of the Holy Roman Empire, and were, in contrast to certain earlier periods, powerless. God tends to be interpreted in the Talmudic literature, Firestone says, as more quietist. In the Jews' subordinate political existence, to survive in fact required *not* fighting.

Firestone admits, in light of his analysis, that perhaps religion is relative. But he does not consider this possibility a threat. Instead, he uses it to ask the question of both Jew and non-Jew alike: can one sustain a commitment to non-violence even when in a position of power? He states:

The greatest struggle for the Jews today is reflected in the moral challenge set before us all, Jew and non-Jew alike, in the twenty-first century. It is easy to cry out for peace and justice when excluded from authority. The real challenge is this: when we are in a position of power, can we carry out the vision of peace?⁵

Firestone's analysis points to an important pattern in the history of God, demonstrating a correlation between political and sacred power. It also airs the possibility that the sacred is determined, at least in part, by human needs, in particular human needs for safety and security. Firestone's analysis does not, however, take into account the idea that perhaps Jewish victories *re-founded* the sacred presence and power in the death of the victims. Firestone's analysis opens wide the need to think more carefully about the connection of the sacred to violence.

Firestone's analysis also misses one further point-- namely, that the quietist sacred during times of Jewish vulnerability may have been nothing more than a redirecting of the violence. During periods of political weakness, for example, violence was projected not upon God but upon the dominating powers. Rivalries from the Tanakh were made archetypal: Esau became the progenitor of evil; Esau was Edom, and later Rome and Christianity. God may have been quietist, but the political and ideological battlefield was not. Violence was still *out*

⁵ Ibid, 83.

there. And somehow the sacred was caught up in its midst, denigrating “Esau.” Firestone’s moral challenge will have no bearing if one cannot understand and take responsibility for the violence that lurks deep within humanity, and how humanity connects the sacred to it. To respond to the moral challenge Firestone puts before us first requires insight into the mentality and the mechanism that propagates violence and victims in the first place.

René Girard is one writer who is not afraid to assert humanity’s deep entrenchment in violence. Girard may be said to organize the thought of scholars such as Tribble, Firestone and others, inside of a structure that gets to the heart of how victimage operates and why it is so pervasive in sacred scriptures. In Girard’s 1972 work *Violence and the Sacred*, he made the stunning assertion that violence is, in fact, the foundation of culture. Groundbreaking in the creativity and sheer breadth of his endeavor, Girard points to examples from myth and religion from across the world to confidently state that human societies are built upon an original act of murder. The effectiveness of these original murders in founding civilization, and later in reconciling communities in conflict, was so pronounced, he says, that these original murders became reified and reproduced in religious ritual. Religious ritual is therefore “good” violence, serving ultimately to channel humanity’s aggression in a controlled fashion. Humans erroneously believe the peace and deliverance felt from these controlled acts of violence is from, and even commanded by, the sacred.

Girard does not just provide an aetiology of religious ritual, though. He goes further to explain the innate operations within human nature that give rise to this need for violence. Girard calls the cause of violence “mimetic desire,” which is simplistically (for now, as I will go into detail in chapter one) a type of imitative competition with others fueled ultimately by a more or less existential feeling of emptiness. Humans compete for *being*, run by imitative desire, which inevitably leads to rivalry and violence. The core problem of humanity, for Girard, is our entrapment in the vicious cycle of desire, rivalry, and reconciling sacrifice (i.e. finding a scapegoat upon which to place blame); and the temporary respite we

receive we think is “divine.” We are so enculturated in this schema, it is nearly impossible to think outside of it. Girard advocates that the biblical texts, however, uniquely reveal the mechanism of mimetic rivalry and the scapegoat in which we are stuck. It is through the biblical narratives that our entrenchment in violence is finally disclosed.

This penetrating theory of Girard’s is difficult to ignore. Though Girard, unlike Tribler, is quite direct in his disinterest in the plights of the disenfranchised (and he has been duly criticized for his lack of concern for these issues), he takes our “modern” concern with the voice of the victim (as Tribler’s work does exemplify) and raises the conversation to a structural and aetiological level. Unconcerned with the particular diversity aspects that may define the victims of the biblical texts, Girard’s premise is that the texts are by nature revelations of humanity’s habitual participation in sacrifice and victimage. Tribler’s critique of patriarchy fits neatly into the Girardian mold as just one example of a violent system that creates victims.

Firestone’s moral challenge is met and amplified in a study of Girard as well, which presents the world with the idea that we are *all* caught up in creating victims and oppressors *regardless* of political status. This inclination to blame and scapegoat is more pervasive than one can imagine. Victims and persecutors alike participate in a “sacrificial mentality” barely conscious of what one is doing. On occasion it may be recognized (as we will see in the following analysis of Esther and Jonah); but our entrapment in a larger culture that operates according to violence resists a peaceful solution. Victimage may not in fact be a question of choice. Even with the revelation of the biblical scriptures at our fingertips, Girard predicts that our likely future is a full-scale apocalyptic battle. And yet, there is a glimmer of hope in Girard’s thought that the biblical revelation can help humanity to create a new culture based on a positive non-violent mimesis.

The main enterprise of this dissertation, therefore, is to provide a Girardian analysis of three Hebrew texts and their corresponding rituals, to put forth Jewish “vaccines” for the problem of mimetic violence. Given that the Bible will always

contain “texts of terror”, how can one possibly understand these texts anew and even, perhaps, utilize them for greater awareness through the distinctive tools Girard provides? My initial research of course focused on *whether* the Hebrew revelation as a whole could be correlated with Girard’s theory, and to what extent. The more research I did, the more profitable I found the Tanakh to be for promulgating them. The Girardian study of Jewish practice in ritual form proved just as fruitful. The following questions thus guided me further: How *precisely* do the Tanakh and its *midrashim* reveal and address Girard’s mechanism? And what kinds of ritual prescriptions are there in Jewish ritual life to transform mimetic rivalry before it becomes violent? In demonstrating the usefulness of Girard for the interpretation of Judaism, I then asked: What are the stumbling blocks for bringing Girard into dialogue with Judaism? And does the Hebrew revelation have anything to add to Girard’s theory in return?

A few words about my choice of the term “vaccine” may be needed here, too, to describe how I understand the Hebrew texts and rituals to operate within the Girardian and Judaic schema. The use of the word vaccine to describe how Jewish rituals operate first came up in a discussion with a friend and colleague named Yehezkel Landau at Hartford Seminary back in about the year 2005. It seems no coincidence that a theologian Landau and I both reference in our scholarly pursuits, Walter Wink, also uses this term in his book *The Powers That Be*. Wink, in fact, uses this term with specific reference to Rene Girard:

According to the French philosopher, Rene Girard, Jesus’ death revealed the sacrificial system as a form of organized violence in the service of social tranquility. The sacrificial system is *like a vaccination*, in which a smaller amount of violence is perpetrated against a single victim in order to prevent a greater amount of evil from engulfing society. (italics mine)⁶

The way that Wink uses the term vaccination reflects the term’s meaning in its sense as a controlled dosage of an antigen to ward off the more devastating

⁶ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 83.

effects of a full-blown disease (i.e., the purported “all-against-all.”) Wink, however, envisages the community *doling out* the antigen onto a single victim instead of each member of the community *receiving* the booster shot. Given this, Wink seems to use the term vaccine in the sense of a *catharsis*, which has short term, but no long-term transformational effect on the community in the grip of the disease. And this is how Girard himself imagines the term vaccination initially in his short discussion in *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard asserts that the terms catharsis (a kind of purgation or expulsion) and a related term *pharmakon* (Greek, meaning both ‘remedy’ and ‘poison’), denote the “metaphorical displacement of sacrifice.”⁷ In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard states that the modern concept of vaccination is simply yet another type of sacrificial substitution: “The beneficent process,” says Girard, “is still conceived in terms of an invasion repulsed, a harmful intruder chased from the premises.”⁸ Catharsis, vaccination, and *pharmakon* are all in essence purifications or expulsions in which “the crisis is provoked by a supplementary dosage of the affliction resulting in the pathogenic agents along with itself.”⁹ In other words, they are all mimetic process that use violence to eradicate violence.

While Girard’s theory explains religious ritual in terms of this same process of controlled violence, Girard also views the biblical scriptures as revelations of this violence that have had a lasting effect on human consciousness; that is, the revelation has brought with it an understanding of systemic victimage. As Rene Girard explains in his succinct “Account of Mimetic Theory”:

Christianity, as atheistic anthropology correctly points out, is exactly the same schema, with one fundamental difference, systematically ignored by modern anthropology, the attribution of guilt is reversed and the scapegoat victim is explicitly vindicated. This is why

⁷ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 290.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

Christianity, far from being just one more religion, reveals the lie of all religions (including itself when misunderstood).¹⁰

My choice of the word vaccine follows this trajectory. My use of the term vaccine moves away from the notion of repetitious cathartic expulsion (i.e., of the *pharmakon*) that, in keeping with our medical terminology, does nothing to engage the root cause of the disease, but merely treats the recurring, superficial symptoms. Contrarily, the biblical “vaccines,” in revealing the root of the disease, are meant to help humans, who are naturally mimetic and susceptible to rivalry and violence, to develop *lasting immunity*.¹¹ The way that vaccines work, in fact, is:

by stimulating the immune system, the natural disease-fighting system of the body. The healthy immune system is able to recognize invading bacteria and viruses and produce substances (antibodies) to destroy or disable them.¹²

According to this statement, vaccines generate a biological memory of disease, which importantly then protects the system against future exposure. It is true that some vaccines need to be repeated through one’s lifetime; likewise, the Jewish vaccinations discussed herein will need to be repeated until the biological and spiritual memory has been sufficiently cultivated, and immunity achieved. In this way, vaccines are no longer just sacrificial substitutions, but are anti-sacrificial in that they actively repel against sacrifice (the disease) and move the organism into

¹⁰ Rene Girard, “Account of Mimetic Theory,” (March 2009), accessed January 16, 2014, http://www.imitatio.org/uploads/tx_rtgfiles/Account_of_Mimetic_Theory.pdf.

¹¹ Humans are susceptible to rivalry and violence due their very nature as mimetic individuals and, in Jewish terms, due to their *yetzer ha-ra* or evil inclination as we will discuss in chapter two.

¹² “Definition of Vaccination,” accessed January 16, 2014, www.medterms.com.

a different, inclusive consciousness. The only expulsion that the vaccines herein intend is the expulsion of sacrifice itself.

In a few particular instances, I will also refer to what I call “peace” vaccines. Unlike the traditional vaccine that at least contains a trace of the poison, peace vaccines are a kind of proactive medicine—the generation of health—which is a necessary complement to the protection against disease. We might call these peace vaccines “preventative medicine,” as they utilize the energies of a healthy system without the need for poison; they do not inject with a dose of sacrifice, but rather with peace. They might also be considered “antidotes,” which are tonics used to “neutralize or counteract the effects of a poison.”¹³ The basic trajectory is that peace vaccines will operate as mimetically as their counterpart, creating a biological and spiritual “contagion” in the system, eventually enculturating humans through memory into peaceful relations. These peace vaccines must also be repeated as needed (or as divinely commanded), until enculturation is complete. We will find examples of peace vaccines (or “positive mimesis”) through the dissertation, specifically in the Blessing of the Children (Heb., *Birkhat ha-Banim*) and the Ninevites of Jonah. While it is possible to argue (as I will demonstrate following) that these two vaccines also contain traces of the disease, they are at the same time foundations of a new order.¹⁴

In addition to thinking through the various ways in which the term vaccine could elucidate how Girard and observant Jews could conceive of at least certain scriptures, there was the additional task of choosing the texts for the exercise,

¹³ “Antidote,” accessed January 16, 2004, www.thefreedictionary.com/antidote. The Torah is also, for the observant Jew, referred to as the “antidote,” that is, the healing agent that has been received from the divine for the purpose of drawing humanity into a new, non-sacrificial, design. For the Jew, the whole of the Torah is the antidote to the violence and evil of current existence. Within the Torah, though, are all the individual vaccines, which are of various sorts, to help humans repair themselves along the journey. In this author’s view, the vaccines are all necessary until the system is ready to receive the antidote wholesale.

¹⁴ It is important, too, that the creation of biological/religious memory is not just an individual process, but one enacted inside of a religious community to develop a *collective* immunity and character. The community as a whole needs to receive the shots if the disease is truly to be controlled, even eradicated, and if a new mode of peace and health is to take root.

and what criteria should determine my choice. My decision in this regard was to choose texts that are central to the practice of Judaism – texts that are utilized in full in the synagogue; texts that are commanded reading; and texts that are tied to a specific ritual or set of rituals in Jewish observance. The goal was to bring Girard in conversation with mainstream Jewish practice, and the texts and rituals chosen are, as such, time-tested symbols of Jewish observance across denominations. The texts I chose specifically, based on these criteria, were the Birkhat ha-Banim in Genesis 48, the blueprint for a weekly Sabbath ritual; the Book of Esther and the annual festival of Purim; and the Book of Jonah and the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*.¹⁵ One chapter is devoted to each text and ritual pair and, as mentioned above, they each constitute a different type of vaccine. While some inoculate us by exposure to violence, others inject us with peace. In either case, one receives a powerful and protective memory to ward off disease and generate life. It is in light of our “peace” vaccines that I take up a focused discussion in chapter five on positive mimesis to see if the Hebrew rituals examined enable a stride forward.

I admit the inherent challenge in choosing any text and ritual in the context of a Girardian study. Girard’s claim that religious rituals are violent means (in actuality or in symbol) to control more serious violence puts the validity of any ritual on trial. I agree with Girard that, in many cases, rituals have been developed out of sacrificial hermeneutics (Purim plays are a primary example). In bringing the originating texts together with their rituals, however, it seemed possible to distinguish between the ritual practices that got reverted into the sacrificial, from the rituals that prove to be the antidotes.¹⁶

¹⁵ In interpreting these texts and ritual practices throughout the dissertation, I refer often to the “rabbinic tradition,” which generally denotes early rabbinic commentary that is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*), the Jerusalem Talmud (*Yerushalmi*), and the early *midrashim*, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ Using Girardian analysis upon three different Hebrew texts and corresponding Jewish rituals, one comes to realize that the sacrificial mechanism is not just an aggressive inclination in ourselves, but the very structure of our thought. One of the highlights of this study has been the unraveling of how the selected biblical texts themselves regress into sacrificial thinking while at the same time revealing it. The sailors of Jonah, and Jonah himself, are figures I will use to illustrate this phenomenon. The rabbinic commentators and even modern scholars fall equally into a sacrificial hermeneutic, often obscuring the very principle the texts themselves are trying to

The dissertation also addresses a fundamental gap in scholarship connecting Girard's ideas with Judaism. I express my deep indebtedness to Sandor Goodhart, who represents the primary exception to this statement. Goodhart has written numerous articles and treatises connecting Girard to Emanuel Levinas, as well as Girard-inspired exegeses on the several biblical passages and practices.¹⁷ Aside from a handful of papers otherwise (which I will address as pertinent), Goodhart stands alone.¹⁸

In contrast, much scholarship has been devoted to Girard's theories of mimetic desire and scapegoating in Christianity. Christian scholars and laypersons alike have been enthusiastic in presenting Girard's theology of the cross as an attractive non-violent alternative to the theology of sacrificial atonement. The paucity of Jewish scholarship on Girard in light of the flowering of Girard in Christianity is notable. This is at least in part, if not entirely in my estimation, due to Girard's own articulated position regarding the Hebrew Scriptures. For Girard, the revelation of the Tanakh is at best incomplete, and at worst unable to answer to the blatant and disturbing violence permeating the scriptures and our world. For Girard, while the Hebrew texts do present an enormous leap forward in the consciousness of humankind, (i.e., they are written from the perspective of the victim), they present a sacred that is still ambivalent when it comes to violence. For Girard, the Hebrew revelation is simply unclear and unsatisfying. The following chapters are also, therefore, an effort to address

disclose. In doing this, the religion that has been passed down through the generations is still just a mask for violence. Scholarship on Girard has covered how this phenomenon has played out in the history of Christianity, and I am deeply indebted to Anthony Bartlett, Charles Bellinger, and Peter Stork in particular for their contributions in this area. Throughout my analysis herein, I offer a parallel in the tradition of Judaism.

¹⁷ Goodhart sources will be cited as used.

¹⁸ Also notable is Raymond Schwager's very comprehensive analysis of the Old Testament in Girardian terms. He ultimately asserts, however, that the narratives are contradictory and inconclusive. He suggests that they would be reconciled only if brought under the hermeneutic of Isaiah's Suffering Servant, which he regretfully declares as a passage glossed over and forgotten by the Jews. Schwager makes a good observation in noting the consistent trend of reinterpretation within the Hebrew Bible itself. Unsatisfied with the contradictions, however, Schwager, like Girard and others, advocate for the New Testament as a reinterpretation that reconciles the discrepancies found in the Old. See Raymond Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000).

Girard's criticism. The following chapters systematically present various case studies side-by-side to test and elaborate on a kind of "Girardian Judaism."

In terms of methodology, I have simply used Girard's ideas of mimetic desire and scapegoating as a lens through which to exegete the Hebrew texts chosen and their corresponding rituals. This method of course assumes the basic soundness of Girard's theories, and this author admits to this assumption in the conception of this work, and throughout its main expository chapters. The last two chapters of the dissertation do, however, raise some essential questions about Girard's theory, and whether it holds water in light of the analysis presented. I offer by the end that perhaps our Girardian lens, after all, prevents us from noticing the models already at our disposal in creating an alternative future of "positive mimesis." I offer that perhaps Girard's theory falls too often into the mimetic crisis of which it speaks, requiring a scapegoat for resolution; and Girard often makes it sound as if his scapegoat is human nature itself. But to be fair, Girard does indicate that transformation *is* possible, just not likely. My own analysis, at least I hope, provides a less dramatic approach and solution concerned more with our day-to-day struggle about how to relate to others; how to manage practically when there is a crisis; how to *be* whole and complete; and how to know that we, and all the children of the world, are blessed. Girard's insistence that we are in a time of spiritual crisis only further enflames humanity into crisis-mode. I assert, in fact, that humanity has always been in a spiritual crisis. But if we relax, slow down, and take the time to observe our habitual ways and indeed *hear* what our scriptures are really demanding, we may find our crisis has naturally dissipated.

CHAPTER ONE

Girard's Mimetic Theory and Scapegoating Mechanism

I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.

--Mahatma Gandhi

René Girard was inducted into the *Académie Française* in November of 2005 and as such took his place among the other *immortels*. This honor, most would agree, is well deserved. It comes after a long academic career most recently as the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature and Civilization at Stanford University, and a long list of publications that present, explain, and expound upon the theories of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism—the two theories that have made Girard a virtually household name in the field of social theory and Christian theology. Beginning with Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961, 1965)¹⁹ to his most recent *Battling to the End* (2007, 2010), his writing demonstrates a refinement and expansion of his theories over time. Girard's personal development mirrors his scholarly revelations as well, and one experiences Girard's transforming from an atheist into a man of faith through his writing. Girard is what I would call an embodied scholar-- he was (and is) not only intellectually engaged in his research, but willing to let his texts read him in return, transforming him in the process.

A very brief overview of Girard's body of work begins with *Deceit, Desire*

¹⁹ All dates will be given as 1) the original publication in French, and 2) the date of the English translation.

and the Novel, which is the first work to present his theory of “mediation” (which becomes “mimetic desire” in subsequent works), exploring its operations in the context of literary criticism. *Violence and the Sacred* (1972, 1977) came eleven years later, and proved to be a full throttle introduction of mimesis, bringing the theory into the arenas of anthropology and religion, and introducing the details of what he calls “the victimage mechanism.” Subsequent works remain focused on refinements and elaborations of these two primary ideas: *To Double Business Bound* (1978) is a collection of essays on literature, mimesis and anthropology; *The Scapegoat* (1982, 1986) presents the victimage mechanism through the structure of the “persecution narrative,” and is used to exegete various texts of myth and biblical narrative; and *Job: The Victim of His People* (1985, 1987) is an interpretation of Job as a ‘failed’ scapegoat. Following *Job*, Girard puts out a type of summation of his work in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978, 1987). *Things Hidden* is a masterful work in interview form, which presents Girard’s theories comprehensively and systematically. Girard then puts out four more books that present a widening of application: *A Theater of Envy* (1991) focuses on Shakespeare; *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999, 2001) propels Girard’s theories into the realm of biblical theology; *Evolution and Conversion* (2004) presents an interview format that “takes stock” and in some cases emends Girard’s lifetime of work; and finally *Battling to the End* – Girard’s “finishing” of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’ treatise *On War* -- discusses the trajectory of the world toward apocalypse.

In this chapter, I present a detailed exposition of the two books by Girard that serve the subject matter of this dissertation most intimately. These books are *Violence and the Sacred* (V&S from this point forward), and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (*I See Satan* from this point forward). I focus on V&S for it’s in depth exposition of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism; and *I See Satan* for the application of these theories in the arena of biblical theology. After presenting this overview of Girard’s foundational theories and theological application, I will bring forth some areas that have yet to be fully explored within the primary and secondary literature, setting the stage for the chapters that

follow.

Violence and the Sacred

The Primitive Mindset

In beginning his exposition of his theory of religion in *V&S*, Girard recognizes the need to alter how people think about religion. In particular, Girard calls for a rethinking of sacrificial ritual. For Girard, there have been numerous theories on the origin of sacrifice to date. Girard discusses, for example, some of the theories put forth by W. Robertson Smith, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Theodor Gaster, and Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, whose theories fall into some general categories. Smith and Frazer were some of the earliest theorists on ritual: Smith emphasized the function of ritual to cement community ties and identity, (Durkheim following suit with his own functionalist explanation of ritual as a vehicle for solidarity and “effervescence”); and Frazer elaborated that underneath these rituals were patterns of dying and rising gods—beings that served cultural expression and community prosperity and well-being (Gaster elaborating on Frazer asserting that sacrifices follow the patterns of nature). Hubert and Mauss were critical of Durkheim, but seemed to adapt something of his notion of the totem in their proposal that ritual attributes a divine nature to social and collective forces. Despite the tenacity of these theories, Girard maintains that they have provided only unsatisfying, disparate and inconclusive results; none of them have persuaded scholars (or at least Girard) of their overarching truth. Girard believes these theories are further inadequate in their inability to provide a universal paradigm that can be applied to rituals across geographical space and time. Most important, perhaps, is that these theories fail to provide an aetiology for sacrifice. How did sacrifice—i.e. legitimated acts of violence—come to be a human practice?

Because of the historical gap between today and the time when sacrifice might first have been performed, plus the barrier of culture and modernity that stands between understandings, perhaps a subtle resignation about ever finding the truth had set in. But not for Girard. Girard points to this sense of resignation, but refuses to give in to it. Instead, Girard takes on thinking about the subject matter in a different way so that sacrifice might finally be demystified. Girard begins the demystification process by trying, with the reader, to enter into the “primitive” mindset, insofar as this is possible. Girard acknowledges that his reconstruction is unable to be proven through direct evidence, but he is confident enough that the scenario he presents is a way-- *the way* perhaps-- to finally come to terms with how ancients understood sacrificial ritual, and for what purpose it was performed.

Girard opens with the idea that, for those in primitive cultures, the threat of violent vengeance was overwhelming and acute; that is, when an act of violence occurred, the typical response would be retributive violence, which would continue in a vicious cycle until there was the imminent sense that the entire community could thus be destroyed. The primitive mind was so threatened by communal violence, and the inability to control violent contagion, that preventative measures needed to be put into place lest their communities fall prey to complete dissolution. According to Girard, sacrifice was, and still is in fact, one preventative measure to disrupt the cycle of vengeance. Through the sacrifice of a carefully chosen victim (the details of which will be addressed later), conflicting parties within the community could join forces in the placing of blame, and gain a kind of catharsis through a ritual sacrifice. Instead of ongoing vengeance, the sacrificial victim would be the bearer of all blame, as well as, ironically, the person responsible for restoring the peace. The community, through this kind of mechanism, could return to normal. Girard thus defines

sacrifice in an oddly simple way as: “an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence.”²⁰

Girard offers a more elaborate definition of ritual sacrifice a bit later in his work, which seems pertinent here:

The function of ritual is to ‘purify’ violence; that is, to ‘trick’ violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals...The secret of the dual nature of violence still eludes men. Beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the former continually promoted at the expense of the latter. Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of ‘good’ violence.²¹

“Good violence” would seem to be an oxymoron, but Girard is clearly setting up a framework to help us imagine that “good” violence is the only recourse possible if human communities and cultures are to survive. (He points to cultures, in fact, that have mysteriously disappeared to explain their tragic end.) “Good” violence is simply the sacrifice of one for the many – the one that has the misfortune of becoming the sacrifice Girard call at times the “scapegoat”, and at times the “surrogate victim” or “sacrificial victim.” Good violence is the type of violence that restores the peace for a minimal cost, that is, one life. The alternative is “bad” violence, which is vengeful violence, the type of violence that can yield only more violence. Bad violence costs many lives and contains no hope for restoration or reconciliation. The primitive mind, for Girard, had an acute experience of bad violence, which would make the sacrifice of only one life for peace seem, perhaps not so surprisingly, “good” in the end – even salvific.²²

²⁰ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (John Hopkins University Press, 1972, 1977), 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

²² Girard does not discuss modern examples in which vengeful violence is at play in this work, but does begin to bring his theories into contemporary scenarios of conflict in *Battling to the End*.

We may relate to Girard's theory in the modern day as we must still deal with the consequences of violence. In *V&S*, Girard begins a conversation that he takes up in more detail in his later work *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* ²³ about the gradual evolution of the sacrificial system into the modern day judicial system – a system he calls “the crowning institution to stave off communal retributive disintegration.” There is a distinct difference between the primitive and modern systems, though. In contrast to our modern judicial system, which punishes the guilty (or at least this is what we hope), the logic of the primitive culture was to effect punishment on an innocent party in place of the guilty one. This, for Girard, is absolutely crucial for understanding the origin of sacrifice. By punishing an innocent victim, the cycle of vengeance is broken because one has averted a directly retributive type of punishment. It is this logic that is, further, at the root of the sacrifice of *innocent* victims. Again, Girard impresses the reader with the need to understand the primitive mind to get to the basis of the sacrificial ritual – the need to understand the “primitive” fear of escalating revenge and unleashed violence, which religious rituals are specifically designed to meet. Within the context of a tribal type of culture, it certainly seems logical to take one innocent life to stave off the dissolution of an entire population; whereas today, fitting our modern social arrangement, our system at least purports to be based on punishing the guilty as there is no longer fear of reprisal. Girard thus sets the stage for presenting the finer details of his theory of sacrifice by first having closed this gap in understanding.

What is Religion?

Girard's theory of sacrifice as the killing of one to save many on its own could aspire to moral legitimacy only perhaps in Machiavellian terms. Even if a culture is “saved” through the death of one individual, it is still quite impossible to justify

²³ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephan Bann and Michael Metteer (California: Stanford University Press, 1978, 1987).

murder. Sacrifice, however, is a practice that occurs within the context of religion. Girard, therefore, grapples with religion and how religion serves the sociological function of sacrificial murder that he has put forth.

Girard states: “Religion, in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence.”²⁴ Girard elaborates further by saying that religion is imbued with a “transcendental effectiveness of a violence that is holy, legal, and legitimate successfully opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal and illegitimate.”²⁵ Religion, as a result, has a very important role to play in terms of: 1) keeping an obscuring mythology around humanity’s tendency toward violent self-destruction; and 2) legitimizing otherwise illegitimate acts, e.g. acts of murder such as sacrifice. We will discuss the first point at greater length later, but for now the second point, I believe, is helpful.²⁶ Based on careful readings of ethnographical reports as well as thinkers such as Freud and Levi-Strauss, Girard holds forth that religion serves at once to both proscribe and endorse certain practices, all the time under the auspices of a sacred command. Religion, for example, generates taboos on practices that threaten the stability of society (like incest, murder); but, interestingly, religion may also make these practices legitimate within the bounds of religious rites (as in sacrificial killing). Perhaps, at least in part, due to the influence of Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966), this is an irony that Girard finds within religious systems across time and cultures.

Girard explores the tendency of religion to incorporate and legitimate what Douglas has called “dirt” through the parallel of the modern judicial system. The modern judicial system operates according to an objective type of transcendent authority that instills a control in the social fabric; one living in a modern society feels compelled to follow the laws of this transcendent system almost

²⁴ Girard, V&S, 23.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For a discussion of the first point, please see section below entitled “The Hidden-ness of the Mechanism.”

automatically as the result of living in the culture. It is part of how humans have learned to live together, and part of how cultures are transmitted. The modern judicial system, therefore, can be said to function as a social control.

Punishment, even death, is also part of this judicial system, though. The judicial system was set up and retains the right to put a human being to death within the realm of the law in spite of the fact that the law itself prohibits murder. The modern judicial system, like religion, could therefore be said to incorporate the “dirt”—to act as a transcendent authority, able to legitimate an otherwise proscribed act. Likewise for those in primitive societies, except in primitive societies, it was the notion of the divine or the sacred that functioned as the transcendent authority.

It is within the context of understanding religion as legitimating sacrificial murder that one finds the basis of Girard’s breakthrough idea: that violence is at the heart of religion and the sacred. Religion and its rituals, for Girard, were a function of controlling a violent threat to society—it functioned to keep society under control, safe, and intact; and the divine lent a transcendent authority to the violence within the ritual system needed to appease the need for vengeance and create reconciliation. Religion, cast in this light, *is* sacred violence meant to sustain cultures and keep humans from destroying themselves.

It is beyond a doubt that Girard presents us with a rather bleak picture of both humanity and religion. Religion seems reduced to a sociological function (and Girard is heavily indebted to Durkheim for this), and humans are a mystery to themselves. Even beyond this, Girard paints a picture of the world with no alternative to violence; “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating.”²⁷ Without the underpinning idea that one needs violence to control violence, there would be in effect no need for sacrifice or a sacrificial victim to assuage the need for vengeance. Without this idea, neither would Girard’s theory hold water. One might criticize Girard for being nihilistic given his idea that the best (at least most) humans seem able to produce is

²⁷ Girard, V&S, 26.

“good” violence. Girard states that some rare human beings (i.e. “geniuses” and “saints”)²⁸ prove that an alternative may be possible; but he does not believe humanity can effectively embrace its own darkness without an accompanying socio-cultural upheaval (i.e., apocalypse). This upheaval, paradoxically, will finally lead to the ultimate renunciation of violence and a new order. The “romantic lie” that has sacralized violence has been exposed, and can no longer hide retaliatory or substitutive sacrifice.

It is tempting to ask whether a period of apocalyptic chaos is the only way. Figures such as Jesus and Gandhi, and their forms of resistance, certainly come to mind (two of Girard’s “geniuses and saints”, to be sure). And yet even they were swallowed up in the structure of violence, surrounded in violence generated by others. We are jumping ahead for a moment here, but it is important to underscore the absolute necessity of violence to religion within the Girardian system, and the near impossibility of an alternative. Like Girard’s theology of the cross, non-violent figures serve a very specific purpose; they are mirrors of their attackers, revealing the horror of humanity’s own violence to themselves – or at least this is the ultimate purpose. As Per Bjornar Grande states about the Hebrew prophets: “The prophet’s message, condemning violence against victims, leads to violence against those who reveal the violence. The prophet who brings the victimage mechanism to light, also tends to become the victim of the people.”²⁹ This is how the Tanakh demythologizes the pagan sacred, and these prophetic figures are meant to reveal to their attackers the mechanism of violence and humanity’s innate violent nature, hopefully causing the brutality at least temporarily to cease. Non-violence serves as a mirror to make our violence more apparent.

Girard is very clear about the unavoidability of violence in his system; he believes there is no way we can sustain ourselves in society as we know it

²⁸ Rene Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, trans. Mary Baker (Michigan: State University Press, 2010), 133.

²⁹ Per Bjornar Grande, “Girard’s Christology,” accessed August 2013, http://www.preachingpeace.org/documents/Girard_Christology.pdf.

without the use of “good” violence, which is endorsed in different contexts by either religion or the judicial system. But slowly, Girard believes, we will become more aware of the violence that is at the heart of our system (for even good violence is violence) and, once this happens, the system as we know it will inevitably move toward cultural breakdown, and either disintegration or apocalypse. And this seems, for Girard, to be taking place now.

The Surrogate Victim Mechanism

Having illustrated to this point how violence is at the heart of religion, it is now necessary to move into the details of Girard’s theory. It is one thing to say that religious sacrifice is the substitution of one innocent victim for the sake of communal reconciliation lent legitimacy by divine authority; but it is quite another to find practical evidence to substantiate this claim. Through his work, Girard teases out different aspects of his theory of sacrifice to paint as comprehensive a picture as possible of how such a practice might have evolved.

Girard is direct in admitting that there is no evidence to “prove” the truth of his theory on the origin of sacrifice. Rather, one must search for what might have been the origin through the workings of the imagination. Girard voices the essential question to get our imaginations moving in this direction: what must have happened initially to cause humans to kill their fellow beings? Girard adamantly asserts that there must have been a very serious situation to have given rise to this ritual; human or even animal sacrifice, for Girard, is not something humans would do without cause, even if the cause lies hidden to the human mind. He thus lays out a scenario for how he believes sacrifice originated, and this is through what he calls “the surrogate victim mechanism.” Girard recounts how this mechanism came into being, and why the surrogate victim mechanism must be at the heart of sacrificial ritual, in *V&S*.

Girard discusses various aspects of the surrogate victim mechanism throughout *V&S*, but I think he provides the clearest means for understanding it in his analysis of the play *The Bacchae* by Euripides,³⁰ which he uses to draw out the detailed victimage process. Through this play, Girard is able to discuss aspects of his theory such as mimetic desire, the sacrificial crisis and violent unanimity, all through the festival of Dionysus, which is the subject of Euripides' tragic drama. The festival is an important type of religious event for Girardian theory in general, in fact, as it demonstrates how the overall elimination of differences occurs, thereby leading up to the sacrificial crisis. The sacrificial crisis, in turn, sets the stage for the sacrificial act, which is the pinnacle event and the event that restores differentiation and peace. Now I will go over each step of the mechanism following how Girard presents it through *The Bacchae*.

Girard first and importantly defines the ritual bacchanal that takes place in the *The Bacchae* as a "festival." This is an important type of definition as a "festival" is conceived of as an event that has its purpose in the elimination of distinctions, which is one of the first steps in setting the stage for the sacrificial crisis. Girard describes festivals in general as events in which the social order is turned inside out—social roles are reversed deliberately and, in some cases, this kind of disruption of order may be accompanied by violence.

Girard believes Euripides provides us with an excellent example of the festival in *The Bacchae*, though as we will see a bit later, it is nothing that can be labeled a "typical" festival. *The Bacchae* presents us with a festival that begins harmoniously enough – it is described by Girard as "idyllic" at first – in which role reversals and non-differentiation are kept orderly and to a minimum. Soon, however, Girard reports the festival becomes "a bloodthirsty nightmare" in which Dionysus rapidly eliminates differences including distinctions between the sexes, between man and beast, and between mortals and god.³¹ Girard describes how all men become god-men, mimetic twins, in a Dionysiac frenzy: "God-inspired

³⁰ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, ed. Stephen Esposito (MA: Focus Publishing, 2004).

³¹ Girard, *V&S*, 127.

madness has made each celebrant another Dionysus.”³² In this collapse of differentiation, (brought on by the god), all mortals become mimetic rivals vying for divinity, though in the end they find out divinity cannot be gained as a “prize” – and they realize, with difficulty, that there was no real contest to begin with. Only Dionysus is reaffirmed as the divinity—and as the divinity, he only is both the cause of the disintegration and ensuing chaos, and also the one who stands alone and victorious over the ruins.

Essential to understanding the “mimetic snowballing” that occurs in the Dionysiac festival just described, is exactly what Girard means by mimetic desire. In *V&S*, Girard introduces the notion of desire, specifically mimetic desire, as the root of doubling, non-differentiation, and any resulting violence. This notion of mimetic desire is foundational for his subsequent work and his overall theory of the origins of religion. Before introducing the principle of mimesis per se, though, Girard sets out to first address how we think (as he often does.) Here he attempts to alter how we think about desire. He asserts, for example, that most people tend to view desire as non-violent; but he quickly offers that this is a mere hope that humans buy into. We are, one might say, attached to or fond of our desires – desire is pervasive through life, so it is uncomfortable to think of desire as being a cause of violence. Girard is not afraid to consider the negative effects of desire, though. He puts forth that desire is fundamentally violent, even the cause of reciprocal violence, which culminates in what he calls the “surrogate victim mechanism” and the various forms of religious rites we will be discussing below. Mimetic desire is, in effect, the root of violence creating the need for religion.

Girard goes into a detailed analysis of how he understands the operation of mimesis toward the end of *V&S*. He states that in the varieties of desire there are three variables: the subject, the rival, and the object. When looking from the outside, it appears in a situation of mimetic rivalry that both the subject and the rival are competing for an object. It is important to note, however, that mimetic

³² Ibid., 128.

rivalry does not occur because of the convergence of two desires on a single object; the subject, instead, desires the object *because the rival desires it*.³³ Desiring the object, the rival alerts the subject to the object's desirability. In this way, the rival serves as the model for the subject.

This idea of mimetic rivalry in Girard's view, however, is not merely a competition or a superficial attempt at imitation. For Girard, this phenomenon is at its core a striving or a desire for being. The rival perceives he lacks a way of being that the other possesses, thus he looks to the other person to see what he should desire in order to acquire that being. Objects are merely the substitute for the being that is really desired. Mimetic desire is, therefore, a deep and mostly unconscious yearning to "be" the other, though on the outside it seems like the imitation is related to something tangible. Mimetic desire, because it is unconscious and misunderstood by those engaged in it, almost inevitably leads to rivalry and violence. The closer the "subject" gets to the "model," the more intense the rivalry becomes.

Novelists alone have adequately explored the mechanism of mimetic desire for Girard, and Girard looks in particular to the genre of tragedy in which he sees its workings unfold most clearly. He returns therefore, to *The Bacchae* to show how mimetic desire begins, intensifies over time, causes a state of non-differentiation and "monstrous doubles," eventually giving way to the sacrificial crisis. Let's explore the festival scene again with this idea of mimesis in mind.

The process of mimetic rivalry – in the play and otherwise-- begins with oscillation: in tragedy everything alternates – one character gets angry then abates, then another gets angry and abates, then another, etc.; "through the course of tragedy, each subject gives a blow, each with intention to stop violence – none managing to lay final claim to the object of desire."³⁴ Girard explains how *The Bacchae* illustrates the ongoing dynamic of mimetic desire: first there are the individuals oscillating over the object of desire (i.e. they each want to take on

³³ Ibid., 145. (Italics mine).

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

being the god); then the differences that separate the antagonists shift faster and faster as the crisis grows in intensity until everything becomes blurred (i.e. everyone is a man-God; everyone becomes Dionysus)– the entire everyday world becomes “caught up in the whirl-producing hallucinatory state that is not a synthesis of elements, but a formless and grotesque mixture of things that are normally separate.”³⁵ For Girard, this state is a monstrosity, an extraordinary strangeness of the world, in which categories are no longer clear and differences between the rivals, though not eliminated, are muddled and confused. The rivals become as doubles of each other; inside the chaos of non-differentiation, the rivals become as monsters that symbolically (and literally) defy an ordered reality. The festival scene becomes a melting pot – all markings of individual and social identity have been lost.

Girard calls a “sacrificial crisis” the time when a community reaches this type of critical and threatening level of undifferentiation, requiring an intervention to control disastrous violent outbreak. Girard uses a few different terms when describing the sacrificial crisis. He speaks of undifferentiation, for example, in terms of “mimetic rivalry,” and the escalation of the rivalry to the point of “mimetic twins” and “mimetic snowballing” (*I See Satan*)³⁶; that is, when those in competition engage in such rivalry as to become mirrors of each other (more obsessed with each other, eventually losing sight of the desired object completely.) He also speaks, as mentioned above, of mimetic twins as “monsters” or “monstrous doubles” to elucidate the sense of the boundary-less conjunction of opposites that each figure involved in the sacrificial crisis represents; that is, the monsters or mimetic twins (they may be metaphorical twins or literal twins) symbolize in themselves and in their own rivalry the chaos of an undifferentiated social order.

According to Girard, “order, peace and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions” and the loss of these distinctions gives birth to rivalries and sets

³⁵ Ibid., 160.

³⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 1999, 2001).

family and same-social group members in violent conflict. This undifferentiation is linked at times to ritual impurity, and at times to a privileged status in primitive cultures, e.g. twins who were either privileged or killed. According to Girard's hypothesis, ritual and myth are expressions of the sacrificial crisis created not only to disguise it, but also to reenact it and ritually re-purify those involved in it.

In addition to *The Bacchae*, Girard uses the story of Oedipus to lay out the mechanism that both reveals and conceals the forces at play in his theory of the sacrificial crisis and the surrogate victim mechanism. In the case of Oedipus, the subject is patricide and incest—two crimes that symbolically represent the dissolution of the social order and the breakdown of the family unit. Should such acts run rampant in a society, the society would inevitably crumble. The threat that this kind of chaos brings to the primitive mind, for Girard, has been explained above. What Girard adds through his treatment of Oedipus, however, is a further explanation of the process of undifferentiation. For example, social or familial order is one way to maintain a sense of differentiation in a culture. Without the obligatory prohibitions between family members, this sense of order and differentiation between individuals becomes threatened. Oedipus marrying his mother blurs the identity of himself with that of his father, and there can be no family unit existing in this way. This type of breakdown of the family unit, for Girard, is the beginning of social and cultural dissolution.

Girard speaks of Oedipus or other tragic “criminals/heroes” in one sense as not necessarily responsible themselves for the breakdown of the social order, though they are blamed for it; they are more generally symbolic of the innate potentiality for breakdown in any system. Girard also calls on the figure of Andromache who, like Oedipus, acts outside of the bounds of social civility, representing an incitement to social chaos. The criminal/hero brings fear into the heart and mind because they manifest in themselves the dissolution of order; they thus become the bearer of the guilt—the surrogate victim—who has brought all the ills upon the society in which they are located. While they are certainly symbolic and representative, really their responsibility is also very literal for the

community in which they are victimized. The victim *is* the repository of guilt that, once expelled, likewise is responsible for the restoration of communal harmony.

Girard goes further to explain the mechanism at play in creating the criminal/hero as the scapegoat. Where one may begin a play, a tragedy, or myth, with several “heroes”, each of whom may in the end be declared guilty simply by process of agreement, over due time unanimity is established and one sole individual becomes responsible for both the calamitous destruction, and the restoration of peace. This is the process toward “violent unanimity.” According to Girard, there becomes an elevated level of hostility and clash between members of the community, which creates a kind of mob frenzy leading to the blaming of a victim. In the context of the frenzy,

The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof. The corporate sense of conviction snowballs, each member taking confidence from his neighbor by a rapid process of mimesis.³⁷

In other words, within this irrational realm the pointing to a scapegoat to take the blame for the disorder is an idea that takes on lightening speed and conviction, and it is an accusation that fails to be checked by any external authority.

Where only shortly before a thousand individual conflicts had raged unchecked between a thousand enemy brothers, there now reappears a true community, united in its hatred for one alone of its number....all the differing antagonisms, now converge on an isolated and unique figure, the surrogate victim.³⁸

³⁷ Girard, V&S, 79.

³⁸ Ibid.

Those caught up in this type of mob frenzy, this type of liminal space or space of undifferentiation as presented in both *Oedipus* and *The Bacchae*, occupy the space between unity and difference which makes the community ripe for the sacrificial substitution. Girard adds that this liminality is the atmosphere of terror and hallucination that accompanies the primordial religious experience. In the hysteria of this atmosphere, the monstrous double becomes pervasive and takes on a quality of evil. People become violent in this context and focused on eradicating the outwardly projected evil. To this point, it seems *Oedipus* and *The Bacchae* are in agreement in terms of how they illustrate mimetic desire and the process of undifferentiation.

There is an essential difference between *Oedipus* and *The Bacchae*, though. In *Oedipus*, the surrogate victim mechanism is already at work and importantly protects the society in which Oedipus lives from complete descent into chaos. *The Bacchae* presents us with a different scenario. In *The Bacchae*, extreme violence now taking place, Girard describes what happens in the play as the utter disintegration of social institutions and the collapse of the cultural order. “In the play, everything eventually goes up in flames, but the god emerges unscathed from the ruins.”³⁹ Though every mortal in the play assumes divinity for themselves in vain grasping their own being, the object of their desire is utterly out of reach and they fall into monstrosity, the order around them disintegrating into chaos and collapse. The god they were yearning to be, Dionysus, is all that remains, above the chaos and unattained by mortals.

The Bacchae, for Girard, is not a typical festival. A “typical” festival would culminate in a sacrificial rite, which would reestablish order and deflate any ensuing violence—the festival would be a controlled form of chaos for the purpose of reestablishing the status quo in a relative time of peace (something like what happens in *Oedipus*, with Oedipus being the scapegoat and society returning to normal, though within the context of a sacred rite.) *The Bacchae*, however, is a festival gone wrong. And not only this: Girard believes Euripides

³⁹ Ibid., 126.

is describing not just any festival, but the *original* bacchanal – that is, *the sacrificial crisis itself—the originating event* upon which subsequent festivals are based.⁴⁰ The intensity of this festival, the completeness of the process of non-differentiation, and the following annihilation of the cultural order that must necessarily follow, is the originating event for Girard that was indeed cataclysmic. It was an event that instilled tremendous fear; it was the annihilation of everything known and the collapse into chaos. For Girard, it seems logical that humans will want to avoid this type of disintegration into nothing from happening again at all costs. This type of event is the driver, the motivation, for Girard; this is the type of event that would compel humans to sacrifice if sacrifice would mean the avoidance of such a cataclysm and the restoration of order and peace.

For Girard, Euripides allows us a fleeting glimpse of the hypothetical originary event, and connects it to the sacrificial rite, intimating that there is *a real relationship*—a connection between an actual event and its subsequent imitation in ritual.⁴¹ For Girard, the type of festival depicted in *The Bacchae* is, once again, a type of originating event, a cataclysmic event, which is the ground and impetus for the development of the surrogate victim mechanism—a mechanism that creates violent unanimity and a sacrificial victim in order to control absolute disintegration into chaos and ensure the restoration of order and the continuation of society and culture. Euripides’ festival gone wrong enables us to imagine exactly the type of event that had the gravity to impel humans to commit murder for the sake of restoration. One life, Girard suggests, the life of the surrogate victim, for the sake of the many, so that we can avert the trappings and the truth of tragedy.

Importantly to Girard’s theory as well is his demonstration that festivals, in general, are manifested in primitive societies around the world. These festivals, and even what Girard calls “anti-festivals,” are controlled experiments at non-differentiation which culminate in the reestablishment of order. While there are

⁴⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁴¹ Ibid., 131.

differences in detail across the various festivals that are practiced, Girard is single-minded in maintaining that the structure he presents is foundational, and that Euripides has enabled us to visualize how such a structure began and took shape. Euripides, more than any other writer, helps us to imagine how an originating event might have been the impulse requiring the creation of the surrogate victim mechanism.

Girard's thinking on the origins of sacrifice goes against the grain of some more or less "standard" theories of religious ritual as discussed earlier in this chapter, and Girard takes care to address these theories in his work. It is at this point in *V&S* that he argues against the Cambridge Ritualists (Frazer *et. al.*) who assert that the cycles of nature are the fundamental pattern that gave rise to human thought and actions revolving around death and rebirth, specifically religious rites. This type of thinking, which declares religious rites and festivals as having their basis in nature, has been very persuasive as a theory about the origin of ritual. Girard, however, wants us to consider the origin of ritual from an obverse perspective. Contra the Cambridge school (also referred to as the Myth and Ritual school), Girard asserts the death and rebirth of nature could not possibly have been the impetus for such a drastic action as murder. And Girard certainly gets us with this point—we *are* dealing in ritual sacrifice with the death of a human being (or an animal at the very least); we are not simply observing and commemorating the death of leaves falling from the trees. Girard believes there must have been something other than the changes and repetition in nature that compelled the birth of religious ritual.

According to Girard, the surrogate victim mechanism also occurs in a pattern of death and rebirth. The surrogate victim mechanism succeeds in bringing a crisis to an end, symbolic of a death; but it is also, importantly, the origin of a sacrificial system, symbolic of a birth. That is, the mechanism ends the destructive cycle of violence *and* marks the beginning of a new constructive cycle (the new cycle being that of the sacrificial rite, protecting the community

and allowing culture and order to flourish).⁴² For Girard, it must *first* have been the surrogate victim mechanism with its corresponding social pattern of death giving way to rebirth, and *second* the projection of this pattern onto nature. Girard avers that “Sacrifice deals with humankind, and it is in human terms that we must attempt to comprehend it.”⁴³ The surrogate victim, then, is a social mechanism that in effect provided the window to seeing a similar pattern in nature, not the other way around. Girard sees nature as conforming to human’s pattern and not vice versa. The surrogate victim mechanism and the sacrificial crisis fulfill all conditions required of a satisfactory hypothesis, and it is a type of sociological mechanism, the response of humans to each other within community as opposed to a response based on anything external, such as nature: “I contend that the objective of ritual is the proper reenactment of the surrogate victim mechanism; its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is, to keep violence outside the community.”⁴⁴

The Identity of the Surrogate Victim

Girard presents a tempting theory to consider. His idea of the surrogate victim mechanism, to this point, however, still begs questions about the identity of the victim. If the victim must, as said in the beginning of this chapter, be an innocent victim, and not the guilty party, how does one choose them? Girard admits the impossibility of providing a hard and fast formula for how the victim is chosen, but he does discuss in quite a bit of detail how he understands the process to occur from ethnographic reports.

Girard declares that sacrifice actually requires not just the choosing of one victim, but a *double substitution*. First, there is the substitution of one member of the community for all of them brought about through the operation of the

⁴² Ibid., 93.

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

surrogate victim. This first step happens at the height of mimetic rivalry and out of the mentality of mob frenzy discussed above. The victim blamed here brings the contentious factions together in violent unanimity, and constitutes the “all against one” dynamic integral to Girard’s theory. Second, a “ritual” substitution is superimposed on the first; that is, there is the substitution of a victim belonging to a sacrificial category who takes the place of the original victim. This second step is crucial for, while the surrogate victim comes from inside the community, the ritual victim comes from outside it. In this way, the ritual victim is a neutral party against whom the community could unite, but without fear of reprisal.

In chapter ten of *V&S* Girard expounds further on the concept of double substitution, and he does so within a discussion about the externality of the sacred. Girard has just finished explaining the necessary separation between the community and the sacred (and also violence), which ensures the safety of the community. The sacred is a strong and violent force that has given birth to the community, but is kept at bay for the sheer force of the deity is too strong for the community to survive in its presence. The deity will periodically enter into the community in an onslaught of sacred violence, and the community then appeases the deity through sacrificial rite. In discussing the identity of the victim, Girard points out that it is essential that the ritual victim come from outside the community because the victim must be identified with the sacred. If the sacred is located outside the community, the victim, representing the sacred, must also be from without. Members of the community, on the other hand, are by nature separated from the sacred and cannot be effective sacrifices.

The ritual victim, however, cannot be totally separate; rather, they must be made to be as a “monstrous double.” The victim must symbolize and partake of all possible differences within the community, particularly the difference of within and without. The victim, as monstrous double, passes freely from interior to exterior, and in this way might be called a liminal figure, symbolic of the monstrosity of the original event, the dissolution of differences, including the

ambiguous line between the community and the sacred. The victim is both a link and a barrier between the community and sacred, and differences in general.⁴⁵

Once the ritual victim has been obtained, Girard describes how the community strives to make them conform to the original victim for maximum cathartic potential; they strive to recreate the original victim. This intervention is called the “sacrificial preparation,” the goal of which is to make the victim wholly “sacrifice-able.” The preparation employs two approaches: 1) it seeks to make a victim too close to the community more foreign, e.g. the sacred king (who is required to commit incest to cut him off from the community and transform him into a sacred monster); or 2) it seeks to reintegrate one too foreign, (e.g. the Dinka cattle sacrifice, which seeks to humanize the cattle as sacrificial preparation.)⁴⁶ Girard substantiates the act of sacrificial preparation through varied examples from across the globe and across time, impressively illustrating the boundary-crossing and anomalous identity that is integral to the sacrificial victim and the community they restore.

The Hidden-ness of the Mechanism

Girard ruminates on how he sees society as strangely protected by a kind of religious misapprehension. Humanity, for Girard is strangely naïve and misguided, buying into mythologies which purport to promote peace, love and hope, but which really are founded in a violent act that paradoxically keeps us entrenched in violence while protecting us from its ability to extinguish us. Religious institutions and beliefs are purveyors and keepers of this mechanism; and we are awkwardly both misguided by our religion while protected by it. The rite of sacrifice and the institution of religion are so persuasive, too, because of the concrete results they produce. The rite does indeed promote unanimity and quell violence. It also prevents an outbreak of bloodshed within the community.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 272.

It is precisely that the rite is effective that the truth remains hidden and unknown, and the truth is kept hidden by dint of projecting it onto inscrutable god.

Still, though, one must wonder, given the pervasiveness Girard claims for the surrogate victim mechanism, why humans have simply not noticed it. Girard explores the notion that this mechanism has been hidden from view, perhaps, on purpose:

Men cannot confront the naked truth about their violence without the risk of abandoning themselves to it entirely...It is possible that the survival of all human societies of the past was dependent on this fundamental lack of understanding.⁴⁷

The natural question to ask, then, is why can't man successfully confront his own violence? Would this not be a step toward ceasing the vicious cycle instead of exacerbating it?

I think this question is worth teasing out. To do so, let's take the Holocaust as an example, and of how humans have tended to think and speak of this event in general. The tendency when discussing this historical atrocity and descent into mass chaos, as I have experienced it, is to squarely place the blame on Hitler, as if he were the only one responsible. When one thinks of the Holocaust generally, one does, I believe, think of Hitler as the instigator and perpetrator of the evil (perhaps much like how we think of Oedipus [and his community thought of him], but on a grander, world-affecting scale.) The Holocaust, however, was the result of an entire cultural order and not one man; it could not, in fact, have been carried out by one man alone. Rather, it took the participation of not just one, but in fact several cultures to escalate the violence to such horrific lengths. But are we ready to face this fact? This would involve a very difficult and soul-searching look at how a culture, and with other cultures

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

standing by, could have bred this kind of evil. Perhaps the biggest block to confronting this is in fact because this kind of genocide still occurs in the world, and many cultures, most cultures, let it happen.

To Girard's point, we may not yet, as a species, be ready and willing to face our own violent participation. To do so, as Girard does point out, would lead to further breakdown of cultural orders around the world. This breakdown would cause further violence, as there would be no "good" violence to control it. The world does still seem to be operating out of a surrogate victim mechanism, and from within the confines of a sacrificial mentality; blame is still accorded to individuals who must fall for the sake of others' righteousness and restoration, one, and sometimes many, at a time. Humanity might not like to be responsible for their participation in sacrificial culture, but the use of the sacrificial technique on both small and large scales cannot be denied.

The Unity of All Rites

Toward the end of *V&S*, the reader begins to understand that Girard is selling his theory of the surrogate victim as foundational for human nature across the board, as well as the operations of the world. In chapter eleven, Girard focuses specifically on proving the common foundation of religious rites as he asserts that all rites are based on the surrogate victim mechanism. He uses varied rites to make his case, demonstrating the idea that an outward diversity is not necessarily indicative of difference in ground. He turns to ritual forms including cannibalism, rites of passage, and rites of kingship to illustrate the varying ways the surrogate victim mechanism can form the basis of religious practices.

In his discussion of cannibalism, Girard invites the reader to look at the ethnographic reports from the Tupinamba Indians of North West Brazil. The Tupinamba's primary form of cannibalism was a ritual form reserved for enemies brought alive to their village – enemies who were sometimes kept alive for years

before being devoured. During the period in which they were kept alive, the enemy/victim was given the task of acting out social roles, until they became “a complete human being,” meaning one who has a place and function within society. As a foreigner acting as part of the community, though, the enemy/victim exemplified the contradictions society creates – he is at once an enemy yet living within the confines of the tribe; he is at once outside the social order and part of it; he is to be killed, but is kept alive. The enemy/victim in this way represents the kinds of contradictions that threaten the stability and order of society, essentially living in an impossible situation that can only end in death.⁴⁸ The surrogate victim is ritually created in order to reflect and absorb the community’s inner tensions as well as any accumulated hatred or bitterness, which can all be externalized and digested (literally) in the act of the cannibalistic rite.

Girard provides a second example of how the rite of cannibalism operates according to the surrogate victim mechanism with an illustration from the Tsimshian tribe. The members of this tribe are reported to have an agreement amongst each other never to agree; thus they live in a permanent state of war maintained for the purpose of providing victims for ritual cannibalism.⁴⁹ The victim, in this context, is always reconciling the permanently warring tribes, promulgating the need for continuous rites. It is in this deliberately contrived state of warfare that the rites provide stability and the means to maintain the status quo. The surrogate victim mechanism is the antidote to the constant threat of chaos.

Girard then turns to rites of passage to demonstrate how this type of rite is also founded upon in the surrogate victim mechanism. Here, Girard uses Arnold van Gennep’s work *Rites of Passage* as his main source.⁵⁰ Based on van Gennep’s work, Girard cites two distinct stages in a primitive’s change of status:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 275.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 278.

⁵⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

first, they experience a loss of previous status; and second, they acquire a new one.⁵¹ For Girard, when the initiate loses their initial status, loss of difference is called to mind, putting us on familiar terrain in terms of Girard's greater theory and the stage upon which violence and in turn the sacrificial crisis enter. During the rite of passage, the initiate exists in a state of liminality; they symbolize literally in themselves, and their in-between identity, the loss of distinctions that can plunge a community into chaos and a subsequent sacrificial crisis. Girard believes the mere presence of initiates is a threat to society for they confront the community with the possibility of violence and contagion.⁵² Girard asserts that primitive societies created procedures to direct the dangerous flow of energy generated by these events into channels prepared by the cultural order, thereby able to integrate the initiate back into a structured identity and more generally sustain, through the rite of passage, reentry into the social structure and the status quo. There may or may not be a literal sacrifice offered at a rite of passage, but the point here is that the principles and stages of the surrogate victim mechanism are represented in this rite. "Wherever there is potential for dangerous change, the remedy lies in ritual, and inevitably in the reproduction of the original solution, a rebirth of differences."⁵³

Girard, in light of the rites he discusses, all of which I will not go into here, asserts that there is a unity among rituals that parallels the operation and principle underneath the surrogate victim mechanism.

There is a unity that underlies not only all mythologies and rituals but the whole of human culture, and this unity of unities depends on a single mechanism, continually functioning because perpetually misunderstood – the mechanism that assures the community's spontaneous and unanimous outburst of opposition to the surrogate victim.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 281.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 284.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 299.

In both the rite of cannibalism and the rite of passage, the surrogate victim is intentionally created as a “monster” that embodies opposing identities and exists in an anomalous state in the cracks of social structure. Both the cannibal sacrifice and the initiate of the rite of passage symbolize the loss of difference that sustains order in society and as such threaten society with impending chaos and violence by their very existence. Integration back into order, and the re-establishment of difference through either killing the “monster” or reintegration into a new and structure-bound identity is what is necessary to avoid violent escalation. The pattern that was apparent in the surrogate victim mechanism (i.e. loss of differentiation, escalation of chaos and imminence of violent contagion, monstrous doubling, reconciliation through surrogate victim) is thus apparent in these other rites, enabling Girard to assert the fundamental unity of all rites in this pattern.

Further, Girard maintains there is no real difference between rites of passage and rites to maintain the status quo. He observes of course that some change is inevitable (people grow up, marry, fall sick, etc.), but primitive societies created procedures to direct the dangerous flow of energy generated by these events into channels prepared by the cultural order. For Girard, wherever there is potential for dangerous change, the remedy lies in ritual, and inevitably in reproduction of the original solution, the rebirth of differences, which alleviates and keeps at bay the sacrificial crisis.⁵⁵ All rites, therefore, are just forms of sacrificial rites, and attempts to maintain the status quo. These rites play an integral part in the sustaining of institutional and cultural forms, and thus religious rites have a distinctly sociological function. They also function to protect the human community, though as aforementioned, there is a price and an attachment to violence that must be paid for this kind of protection. The price we are paying is what Girard believes we are perhaps only gradually now waking up to.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 284.

Final Commentary on *Violence and the Sacred*

In his conclusion, René Girard demonstrates his approach to the origin of religion and culture quite clearly in his assertion that there is, indeed, and for him without a trace of doubt, one structure that can explain the aetiology of religious rites and rituals, regardless of their diversity and seeming incompatibility on the exterior. Girard denies the validity of previously expounded theories on the origin of religious rituals; he denies their origin in nature and in Freudian psychology. He continues that religion is not patterned upon observation of the world; nor is it a function of our psychic lack of fulfillment in relational issues with our parents. Rather, religion is grounded in an event, an original sacrificial event, which prevented the imminent and overwhelmingly threatening dissolution of a community. The saving act of violence, like the initial violent onslaught that created the chaos, became externalized as a manifestation of the “sacred.” Religion, for Girard, is thus grounded in the human being, in human nature, in how humans interact with one another; religion is grounded in how we protect ourselves from extinction and ensure our survival. Religion is not based on nature; it is based on *human* nature. Religion is, indeed, a human, even evolutionary, phenomenon.

Integral to Girard’s theory of course is that the human phenomenon, the originating event of which we are speaking, is an act of violence. The originating event is a murder. Thus, religion is founded not only in human nature for Girard, but in the aspect of our nature that resorts to violence to handle perceived threats or chaos, and restore peace. Whereas the originating event took place in a situation of extreme perceived threat and chaos, however (as in *The Bacchae*), contrived religious rites are performed in the context of relative peace. Many imitative rites purposefully incite forms of chaos, such as reversing gender roles or power structures, to set the stage for the sacrificial crisis, culminating in a sacrificial ritual that returns the community to its sense of order, differentiated identities and structures, and the ultimate affirmation of the status quo. Religion,

in addition to being a mechanism ensuring our survival, is also a mechanism affirming social and cultural order and control.

The only thing preventing us today from accepting or even seeing the “truth” of Girard’s theory, according to Girard, is our suspicion, which he implies comes from our having been influenced too heavily by deconstructionism’s allergic reaction to any form of absolutism. But for Girard, this suspicion manages only to leave us in a place where we have no consensus on religion or ritual; we have only varied and dissonant analyses which ultimately serve only to hide the foundational structure he has identified. We are thus forced to choose. On one hand, we may buy into deconstructionist plurality which, in the end, provides us with a plethora of possibilities to ponder regarding the origin of religion and ritual; and yet at the same time, it gives us no sense of continuity—no sense of a thread that may indeed tie all religions and all religious rites together in a frame that might make the mystery of religion more intelligible to us. On the other hand, we may choose Girard’s structuralism, which provides one absolute and unyielding “truth” – a dangerous proposition to buy into because there is no room for alternatives, but exceedingly attractive in its certainty, especially if we concede that Girard might be right.

Having said all this, Girard covers his bases by admitting that the generative violence, and the originating event, can never be witnessed, directly observed, or proven. Calling up theories such as evolution and Freudian psychology, Girard offers the idea that perhaps not being able to “prove” a theory is not essential (as neither of the other theories that have radically altered humans perspective on the world can in fact be proven either.) But Girard displays his academic arrogance in declaring his theory superior than other ground-breaking theories—superior even to evolution because the surrogate victim mechanism offers an explanation of the role religion played in primitive societies, which evolution did not; and better than Freudian theory because Freud’s theory was inconsistent and failed to accomplish a perspective on the unity of all religious rites. Girard is immovable in his declaration that he has

uncovered the structural foundation of religion. The entirety of his first exposition of this theory in *V&S* is a work designed to give the reader insight into the details of his theory through countless examples from primitive religion as well as certain modern expressions, which despite the diversity of manifestations, convincingly do point to a consistent underlying structure.

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning

In *I See Satan*⁵⁶, Girard applies his theory of mimetic desire and the violence embedded in ritual to the realm of biblical interpretation, hence this book's clear import for the current undertaking. Girard moves through selected biblical texts—from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament—to illustrate how the biblical scriptures were the first scriptures self-conscious of their own violence – that is, they were the first to reveal mimesis and the single victim mechanism Girard delineated in *V&S*. For Girard, the biblical scriptures importantly present scenarios of violence (as do the pagan myths), but where they differ is that the biblical scriptures present these scenarios from the perspective of the victim. In doing so, they overturn the “pagan sacred,” which is a violent sacred that persecutes guilty victims, with a god that is victimized, innocent, and free of violence. Girard's analysis is undeniably at the meeting point of sociology and anthropology, but offers distinct and decisive theological implications as well. I will go through the main ideas of *I See Satan* below in an attempt to illustrate how Girard's ideas from *V&S* are applied to the biblical scriptures, and become essential for the task of biblical studies and theology.

⁵⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 1999, 2001).

Mimetic Rivalry Recognized in The Ten Commandments

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (hereafter *I See Satan*) opens with a discussion of the Ten Commandments to demonstrate that the bedrock of biblical religion is grounded in the understanding of mimesis and mimetic rivalry. Girard looks specifically at commandments five through ten, all of which express prohibitions around different kinds of violence (i.e. stealing, adultery, murder, bearing false witness, coveting your neighbor's wife). Girard presents a unique interpretation of the commandments in that he sees commandments five through nine as ultimately explained by the tenth commandment. The tenth commandment, (coveting one's neighbor's wife etc.), different from the rest, specifically prohibits desire itself. For Girard, the connection seems clear: desire is the root of violence, and thus commandment five through nine are really just working up to the ultimate commandment, which is the ground of them all, in the prohibition of desire itself. The principle source of violence between human beings in Girard's thought is mimetic rivalry which causes conflicts so intense that rivals will denigrate each other, steal from one another, sleep with the other's spouse, or commit murder (i.e. four of the ten commandments).⁵⁷

For Girard, the tenth commandment "signals a revolution" that comes to fruition in the New Testament, and it is right in the opening chapter of his book that Girard demonstrates something of a development in his thought since *V&S* with regard to mimesis. In Girard's understanding, the prohibitions as expressed in the ten commandments are necessary—they arose out of the human being's inclinations toward mimetic rivalry, and there needed to be stops put into society for harmonious communal living. This notion is in tune with what Girard has previously articulated in *V&S*, which is that mimetic rivalry needs to be curtailed (through prohibitions, rituals, etc.). One primary criticism of Girard's work on mimesis, however, is that while we are provided with many examples of rivalry to teach us how *not* to behave, we have no non-violent example to follow. As

⁵⁷ Girard, *I see Satan*, 11.

Girard himself points out in Freudian fashion, the prohibitions that keep us in check also tempt us to transgress. How can one escape the vicious cycle of mimetic rivalry?

In response, (perhaps to the criticisms he has received), Girard embarks – if ever so briefly-- on a discussion of what Rebecca Adams has called “positive” or “creative” mimesis and Vern Redekop has called a “mimetic of blessing.” The truest example of positive mimesis for Girard is to be found in Jesus. For Girard, Jesus does not abolish the law—he does not rid of the prohibitions—but he fulfills the law in the sense that he provides a model for desiring nothing but God. “The basis of imitating Jesus is to imitate his desire, which is to resemble God the Father as much as possible.”⁵⁸ Jesus, in other words, desires God, imitates God, and assumes the *being* of God. He models the perfect image of the divine and he invites us to do the same. In then imitating Jesus’ desire, we in turn desire only God, aligning our being, via mimesis, with the divine. The incarnation of the divine in Jesus is an integral theological point for this aspect of Girard’s “antidote” to violent mimesis; imitating Jesus *is* the imitation of God himself while at the same time the incarnation provides a human model with whom one can enter into a mimetic relationship. Girard asserts that there is nothing egotistical, greedy or arrogant about this – we are not to become Jesus, we are to imitate his desire. The best way of preventing violence, thus, is not in forbidding objects or desire (like the commandments do), but in offering to people the model that will protect them from mimetic rivalries of violence, and providing an alternative way of being.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁹ This notion of positive mimesis and what it entails will be discussed in much greater detail in chapter five. It is also useful to state here that mimetic desire is not always bad in itself even if it is responsible for violent acts that distress us when it is uncontrolled or misguided (15). As Girard points out, if there were no mimesis, our being and actions would be reduced to instinct like the animals. Without mimesis, there would be neither freedom nor humanity.

Scandals and the Single Victim Mechanism in the Gospels

Girard's intimation that positive mimesis is possible (given, of course, that mimesis is integral to being human) is uplifting; nonetheless, the focus of *I See Satan* is not how to embrace and manifest this new model. In this work, Girard remains focused on how mimetic rivalry is illustrated in the narratives of the Bible and what this means theologically. In this vein, Girard calls up several examples from the Gospels to make his point. I will give one example here to illustrate a *scandal*.

"Scandals" are mini-rivalries that circulate and converge to create a mimetic crisis. In *I See Satan*, Girard explains that scandal is from the noun *scandalon* and verb *scandalizein* (Gr., from verb "to limp," meaning to continually collides with his or her shadow). Scandal is "not one of those ordinary obstacles that we avoid easily after we run into it the first time, but a paradoxical obstacle that is almost impossible to avoid: the more this obstacle, or scandal, repels us, the more it attracts us."⁶⁰ Scandal is sometimes translated as 'stumbling block,' and scandals are impossible to avoid because of the sheer number of humans there are, and the multitude and pressure of scandals circulating all around us.⁶¹ For Girard, scandals begin as seemingly clear-cut rivalries with distinct boundaries and clear antagonists. Scandals, however, often begin to overlap, antagonists may become involved in more than one scandal, and smaller scandals tend to become absorbed into larger scandals until one, main, polarizing scandal remains. It is when the scandals converge in this way that one has a mimetic crisis, eventually causing the whole community to mobilize against one single individual.⁶² Girard states: "scandals all swarm around the single victim like worker bees around the queen held together by intensified contagion."⁶³ And the more unbearable personal scandals become, the more

⁶⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, 16.

⁶¹ Ibid., 18.

⁶² Ibid., 23.

⁶³ Ibid., 24.

they are wont to be extinguished in one huge scandal – the war of “all against all,” which would annihilate the community if it were not transformed into an all against one.

Girard shows how, in the gospels, Jesus warns his disciples that they will participate in the mimetic contagion of the scandal—and on the side of the persecutors no less.⁶⁴ The sudden rejection of Jesus in the gospels stems from mimetic contagion, and scandals play a role in the convergence toward Jesus as the single victim. A primary example of this phenomenon is in Matthew 26.73-75 when Peter imitates hostility when plunged into a hostile crowd, and then denies Jesus.⁶⁵ Though his love for Jesus is sincere and profound, “The Gospels show him to be the puppet of his own mimetic desire, incapable of resisting pressures that work upon him from moment to moment.”⁶⁶ Girard asserts that looking for the cause of Peter’s denial through a lens of psychology or temperament misses the point and minimizes its significance for Christianity.⁶⁷ Even worse, Girard points out that blaming Peter’s character for his response implies that when we read this passage, we believe we would have acted differently in his situation. It is akin to how children resist imitating their parents, and then grow up to be just like them (hence the old adage “what you resist, persists.”) For Girard,

This false difference is already the mimetic illusion of modern individualism, which represents the greatest resistance to the mimetic truth that is reenacted again and again in human relations. The paradox is that the resistance itself brings about the reenactment.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., 23-4.

⁶⁵ All translations of the biblical text are from the New Revised Standardized Version unless otherwise noted.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

In seeing Peter's fault as something we have already corrected, we fail to see our involvement in the mimetic scandals that exist all around us.

With his theory of mimetic rivalry, Girard refutes the given Christian theology of ransom à la Anselm *et al* that has been a mainstay of Christian doctrine for centuries in favor of a mimetic anthropology. For Girard, God is not instigating the death of Jesus or requiring the death of Jesus in any way in these narratives. There is nothing in the gospels, he states, to even suggest that God causes the mob to unite against Jesus; violent contagion is enough.⁶⁹ The victim, Girard says, is chosen spontaneously by the contagion itself. The crucifixion, in this light, may be explained as an anthropological event. The reason why it has never been interpreted this way, though, for Girard, is because other factors entered into the narratives of Jesus, which affected how we understood and interpreted the revelation inherent in them; the narratives include information that prevent us from seeing how Jesus was in fact chosen by chance as the result of the mob mentality characteristic of the single victim mechanism.⁷⁰

The kind of mob mentality that ultimately closes in on a single victim as in the gospels is illustrated well through the literature Girard introduces in *V&S* (such as *The Bacchae* described above). It is also illustrated very succinctly and clearly in Girard's exposition of the myth of Apollonius in *I See Satan*. This myth, written by Philostratus, (a pagan of the second century CE), tells of a man named Apollonius who "heals" a plague that was wiping out the city of Ephesus.⁷¹ The myth includes Apollonius coaxing the townspeople to stone a beggar on the street, saying the beggar is the demon responsible for the plague. The townspeople are hesitant to follow Apollonius' command, but Apollonius

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 25. As an example, Girard cites anti-Semitic interpretations of the crucifixion, which use ethnic or religious identity as a reason for persecuting Jesus. He asserts that these kinds of interpretations cast shadows over the underlying reason of the crucifixion, which is really mimetic contagion and scapegoating.

⁷¹ According to Girard, a "plague" was not always physical but included a social dimension. Wherever "real" epidemics occurred, they affected social relations. Wherever social relations were disrupted, epidemics could occur. Thus "plague" could denote a social problem, a physical epidemic, or both.

convinces them to stone him. While stoning him, the beggar's personality becomes aggressive, "proving" that he was indeed a demon. The stoning passes as miraculous as it puts an end to the "plague" of Ephesus. Girard states that Ephesus was suffering from social internal tensions as at least one aspect of its "plague," which Apollonius knew could be eradicated with the sacrifice of a scapegoat. Uniting the city against a victim was enough to ease tension and restore harmony.

This myth, however, describes the deliberate manipulation of the masses to create a scapegoat. As such, the myth comes across as strangely self-conscious, blatantly portraying the inner workings of mimetic contagion, mob frenzy, and the single victim mechanism.⁷² But the myth of Apollonius does not go all the way; it does not fully reveal the single victim mechanism. Girard explains that in a complete myth, the one sacrificed tends to become a god after the "miracle" their death produces. Philostratus' story is a "pale form of myth" in that the stoning does not, in the end, produce a god. "If the collective violence were more powerful, the beggar would be divinized." Philostratus, Girard claims, has only written "half a myth"; the second transformation is completely absent (cf. Oedipus for contrast).

The gospels, on the other hand, present the full arc of the single victim mechanism, which moves from scandal to scapegoat to divinization of the victim. And Girard avers that this full spectrum gives myth a certain power, associating the victim with the sacred, which can be drawn upon infinite times in rituals for restoration. The myth of Apollonius cannot provide this. The myth of Apollonius, however, if viewed together with the gospels, reveals even more clearly human being's vulnerability to manipulation, violence, mob mentality, and scapegoating, which is precisely, for Girard, what led to Jesus' death. For Girard, it is the reading of myth and gospels together that allow this mechanism to be fully

⁷² This myth, written in the century after Jesus, may perhaps even be seen as something of an ironic commentary on the passion narratives. Girard does not discuss, nor do I think he has looked into, whether this myth was in reality a deliberate comment or criticism upon Christian theology, but it seems a likely possibility.

exposed. One needs the gospels in order to see through the mythology; mythology alone would only perpetuate the mechanism and keep it hidden.

Aside from Jesus becoming deified and the beggar in the above myth's failure to represent the full spectrum of the mechanism, there are other important differences. First, Girard notes that there is no prior demonization behind the divinity of Christ.⁷³ Christians don't ascribe any guilt to Jesus. Thus, Jesus' divinity cannot rest on the same process as mythic deification. Second, the gospels present an essential ingredient that makes them unique among 'mythic' narratives: they contain a small group of dissidents that separates from the collective violence of the crowd and destroys its unanimity.⁷⁴ This dissident minority has no equivalent in the pagan myths, leading Girard to assert that the structure of the Christian revelation is unique. "The Gospels embody the discernment of a small minority that dares to oppose the monstrous mimetic contagion of a Dionysian lynching."⁷⁵ This rupture of unanimity is also what separates the gospels from the Hebrew Scriptures for Girard, bolstering the idea that the gospels go even further than the Hebrew narratives in debunking mythic deception. The rupture is part of the revelation as it provides a contrast to the unconscious behavior of the crowds, which is summarized in gospel sayings such as "Forgive them for they know not what they do." Peter, also, refers to the ignorance of the persecutors in Acts 3.17. The mimetic process and the single victim mechanism count on this type of unconsciousness in which the persecutors think they are doing good, working for justice and saving their community. This is precisely how myth dupes us. The gospels, however, disclose what is at the heart of our violence and give us what we need to reject the mythologies that have kept us ignorant. Girard calls "prophetic" any text that denounces persecutory illusions; thus, the Psalms, Job, many parts of Genesis,

⁷³ Girard, *I See Satan*, 123.

⁷⁴ Girard describes how the mimetic contagion affects all but a few of the women, showing the power of the contagion even among Jesus' disciples who had received warnings of its operations.

⁷⁵ Girard, *I See Satan*, 178.

and of course the Gospels, are placed in this category as well as literature that may exist without religious intent (Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky *et al.*).

The Hebrew Scriptures – The Victim's Perspective

In between the ancient myths and the gospels is the Hebrew Bible. Girard uses several examples in order to show how the Hebrew Scriptures open up a new kind of perspective that moves away from blood sacrifice to the humanization of the victim and bloodless reconciliation.

The story of Joseph is one of the primary examples Girard draws on. Girard uses the biblical story of Joseph as a contrast to ancient myths to show that they are in basic opposition over whether collective violence is justifiable. The Bible, he asserts, clearly says no; whereas ancient myths say it can be legitimate. Bringing us back to Oedipus as an example of ancient myth, we have seen that, in Oedipus, Oedipus is found guilty, made a victim, and justifiably expelled. This, for Girard, conveys the basic action and perspective of ancient myth, which is that the victim is always wrong and the persecutors are always right. The myth of Apollonius above also shows how Philostratus takes advantage of this kind of mentality. This stands in direct opposition to the Bible in which Joseph, for example, is always portrayed as “right” during the instances of his persecution; Joseph is the victim of his brothers’ persecution not because Joseph was guilty, but because of his brothers’ jealousy. The essential observation Girard is making declares that, structurally, the ancient and biblical myths look quite similar, but have radically different viewpoints: “The structural similarity is the basis of a radical difference from the standpoint of the narrative’s identification with the victim.”⁷⁶ The basic and essential difference between the Bible and myth is in the biblical assertion of the victim as innocent and the myth’s assertion of the victim as guilty.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 109.

Girard also draws on the Book of Job to make this point. Calling the book “an immense psalm,”⁷⁷ Girard discusses the book in terms of its anthropological dynamics, pointing out how Job’s ‘friends’ and community only serve to persecute (mythically, for Girard) Job who is the helpless and vulnerable victim. There is unanimity in viewing Job as one who must have sinned, as guilty and deserving of his punishment, thereby justifying God’s violence and persecution of him as well. Girard asserts, however, that Job ‘takes hold’ of the mimetic contagion and defeats it. Job shows and is convinced that his God is not a God of persecution, but a God of victims. “I know that my Defender lives,” asserts Job and, of course, God affirms in the end that Job is right. The victim in this text is the one in the right; the victims are innocent and the executioners are guilty, says Girard. The executioners, too, are the ones who have projected vengeance and violence onto God; but “they have not spoken right of God.” Girard acknowledges, though, that this is “de-stabilizing” knowledge—the Book of Job, as well as the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, call into question the right of those who persecute and oppress, declaring justice for the innocent victims, and taking a firm stand on the error of persecuting human action. For Girard, the Hebrew Scriptures revolutionized a perspective on conflict: “The reversal of the relation of innocence and guilt between victims and executioners is the keystone of biblical interpretation.”⁷⁸

For Girard, the genius of the Hebrew text is also the renunciation of idolatry. Job, like Joseph, is idolized in his status within the family and the community—Job, in particular, is even considered “perfect” (Heb., *tamim*). Through his suffering, though, Job is humanized, and through God’s theophany, made well aware of his place in the grand scheme of things. Joseph, likewise, endures harsh suffering and is subsequently redeemed. The victims are made right in the end, but are affirmed in humanity through suffering in the process. The Hebrew Bible in this way “rejects the gods created by sacralized violence” and may even be considered “a criticism of the mechanism producing the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 118.

gods.”⁷⁹ In the Bible there is a divine reality that no longer belongs to the sphere of the collective idols of violence. The God, Yahweh, does not depend at all on what happens with humankind. This is the God that reproaches humans for their violence and sides with the victim. In the Hebrew Bible, God is not created from violence; God is UN-created, independent of human action. The divine is clearly separated from any result of collective violence.

Girard points again to the story of Joseph to illustrate the biblical text’s demonstration of bloodless reconciliation in place of blood sacrifice. “The final triumph of Joseph is, not an insignificant “happy ending”, but a means of making explicit the problem of violent expulsions.”⁸⁰ In the Joseph story, pardon replaces obligatory vengeance—and only this is capable of stopping the vicious cycle of reprisals. For Girard,

The essential truth of the Joseph story lies, not in its possible correspondence to facts outside the text, but in its critique of mythic expulsions...It’s the difference between a world where arbitrary violence triumphs without being recognized and a world where this same violence is identified, denounced, and finally forgiven.⁸¹

Girard notes that in the Bible, humans are just as violent as they ever were, and the single victim mechanism is still in place, but the Bible interprets actions uniquely. Girard strongly criticizes those who read the psalms, for example, without seeing the real physical violence of the persecutors who are about to “lynch” their victim (i.e. the psalmist.) Those who only criticize the texts for being violent are ignorant of what constitutes human violence: “They have suppressed, hidden, or eliminated the ‘referent’, which is to say what the psalms are really about.”⁸² Thus, for Girard, the Hebrew Bible is the first place to honor the victim’s perspective, taking the unique view that the victim is not guilty just

⁷⁹ Ibid., 118-19.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁸¹ Ibid., 113-14.

⁸² Ibid., 115.

because they are being persecuted. The Hebrew Bible, for Girard, may not divinize the victim as in the gospels, but it does *humanize* the victim by taking their perspective. The Hebrew Bible also succeeds in the cessation of the idolatrous creation of gods out of violence, and of beginning the process of removing violence from the sacred.

Satan

Girard's most startling assertion in *I See Satan*, however, is that human beings are actually carrying out Satan's work, but of course we have no idea we are doing such. Satan, for Girard, is as he is labeled in the New Testament, namely "the prince of this world"; he is the power that currently rules over human beings. He wreaks havoc with human beings, too, using the world as his playground, and we have been blind to how he manages to do this. To explain how this is so, Girard begins with the gospel phrase "Satan expels Satan" – a strangely nonsensical phrase on the surface, but which takes on an undeniable logic and compelling possibility when exegeted in Girardian terms.

In order to understand this phrase, it is necessary to first look deeply into the character of Satan. According to Girard, Satan, in general, is understood to be a paradox; he is the principle of order and he is the principle of disorder. The Satan that gets expelled is the one of disorder; Girard describes Satan as a cause of chaos – he is the violent contagion that creates mimetic rivalry, sets off the single mechanism, and importantly persuades the entire community that the guilt of the victim chosen is real. This destructive and chaotic aspect is Satan's favorite manifestation. This is the Satan of disorder, and this is the Satan that gets expelled.

Then there is an aspect to Satan that is the aspect of order. It is the Satan of order who does the expelling! According to Girard, as a principle of order, Satan wants to dispel the chaos he has created with mimetic contagion and

restore the peace (even if it is a temporary and unstable peace). Why? Because if reconciliation is not established, the chaos created by mimetic frenzy would ultimately destroy his earthly playground. Satan thus has something at stake in the matter. “It is the same Satan who creates the furnace that sets off single victim mechanism. Satan makes a way of expelling himself out of the highest heat in order to prevent the destruction of his kingdom.”⁸³ Importantly, though, this satanic restoration is done through hearts and hands that succumb to violence. “When the trouble caused by Satan is too great, he provides his own antidote.”⁸⁴ And this antidote is the murder of the scapegoat. Satan can always put enough order into the world to prevent the total destruction of what he possesses without depriving himself for too long of his favorite pastime, which is to sow disorder, violence, and misfortune.”⁸⁵

As Satan is both order and disorder, the instigator of mimetic rivalry and contagion *and* the one who sets off the single victim mechanism that temporarily restores the peace, Girard is saying that human beings are stuck in a satanic cycle quite literally. Anthropologically, the mechanisms out of which we operate are satanic mechanisms that have been programmed into us since the beginning of culture. Satan indeed may be seen, through this hypothesis, as expelling himself; “Satan casts out Satan.” It is Satan on both sides of the equation – he is in the order that he causes to inevitably destabilize, which he then rectifies with the murder of a scapegoat. The single victim mechanism is a satanic mechanism, and scarily the mechanism underneath culture and religion.

According to Girard, our current way of handling human society on earth is through this devilish and violent process, a process that we are only beginning to see through thanks to the Jewish and Christian revelations. For Girard, the Bible is explicit in the choice that exists between Satan and God, death and life. In particular, Girard finds that John’s gospel lays out the consequences of choosing Satan and mimetic desire the most clearly, i.e. satanic murder. The gospel of

⁸³ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

John even scandalizes those who do not detect this choice – if we do not see the choice between the devil and God, we have already chosen the devil. Girard's exegesis of John's gospel includes the important insight that even those Jesus speaks to do not get the choice before them, and they fail to understand how mimetic desire works (e.g. as in the example of Peter again, above). Girard wants to steer us away from the anti-Semitic interpretation of John's gospel to a broader interpretation using mimetic desire and not religious categories as the interpretive scheme.

Theologically, there are two primary points to tease out. First, there is the question of how Satan is related to God. Girard notes how Satan "imitates" God, but in a distorted fashion. Satan is the "ape of God" as Girard describes him—a parasite on creation as Satan cannot create by his own means.⁸⁶ Both God and Satan contain the opposites of chaos and order within them, but where God is infinite being, Satan has no being at all; Satan's transcendence is false, without reality in a religious sense, though his works are felt and formidable on the worldly plane. Girard's Satan is almost Dantean – while travelling with the pilgrim through the *Inferno*, one revels at the expanse of hell and the power that Satan seems to have; Satan controls and punishes all of these fallen souls. But when one finally meets Satan, he is just the husk of a being – a grotesque parody of the tri-une God living at the bottom of the pit of hell. Satan, in reality, is a pitiful nothing. Likewise, Satan, for Girard, is mimetic contagion personified and non-existent as an individual entity; his seeming power is an illusion that will collapse once exposed.⁸⁷ And for Girard, the Jewish and Christian scriptures are the means for this exposure and the ultimate defeat of Satan. The death and resurrection of Jesus is meant, therefore, even in Girardian terms, as the end of the reign of Satan and the end to his government of the world according to the single victim mechanism.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁸ Before the biblical literature, myths presented and enacted this kind of mimetic violence, and always took the side of the perpetrator, as the victim was the *pharmakon* with no

The second theological point is that, through Satan, Girard asserts that the Gospels criticize the gods of pagan religions that have been given a false transcendence. For Girard, the pagan “gods” are credited reconciling powers through sacrifice, and in so doing a violent sacred becomes worshipped, in fact masking humankind’s own violence; our violence is displaced onto a false sacred. The idea of mimetic contagion, however, allows the New Testament to provide a space for the existence of evil without making a god out of it. This is an important aspect of Girardian thought to emphasize given certain criticisms accusing him of a Gnostic theology, criticisms which do not hold water in this light.⁸⁹ Satan becomes, at least in John’s gospel (in the Synoptics the term scandal is used), the impersonal principle of mimetic contagion, but is no more (at least according to Girard) than a personification. There is no absolute evil in existence apart from the force of mimetic contagion and the single victim mechanism. In my view, this understanding of Satan can be drawn out of the Hebrew Scriptures as well, particularly poignant in Job in which the Satan of the folktale envelope may be construed as a personification of the mimetic contagion that spreads through the poetic dialogues.

Despite Satan’s false transcendence, the effect he has on the world is nonetheless real; Satan has effective power. Girard elaborates on the idea of false transcendence in chapter eight of *I See Satan*, where he speaks of the “powers” and “principalities” that are “offspring” of Satan. My understanding of what Girard means by powers and principalities is precisely mimetic desire and the single victim mechanism, which he describes as “rooted in transcendence

voice, but then divinized. The mythic illusion is that these scripts get reenacted in everyday life—the victims have no voice, and scapegoats are “outs” for the restoration of communal harmony. The human race on the whole used to take part in the single victim mechanism unconsciously. “Standing before the myths, we remain the dupes of transformations that are no longer capable of fooling us” (*I See Satan*, 73). Now, we see through the lies of the persecutors and understand the victims must be understood as real and innocent. We no longer give in to the single victim mechanism that would produce false gods. We don’t want to make ourselves accomplices to the witch-hunt. The process still operates in the world in a weakened form—a form therefore incapable of producing true myths. According to Girard, the Bible was the first literature that gave the victim a voice and took the side of the victim.

⁸⁹ See Richard A. Cohen, “Is René Girard’s *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* a Gnostic Theology?” (2008), *Academia.edu*, accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www.academia.edu>.

that is unreal yet effective.”⁹⁰ “Sacrificial rituals do not seek to become one with false transcendence; they do not aspire to mystical union with Satan. To the contrary, they try to keep this formidable figure at a distance and hold him at bay outside the community.”⁹¹ The problem though, as said above, is that they do this by the power of Satan without realizing it. The more they try to keep him at bay, the more they invoke his force in mimetic contagion and the single victim mechanism, using Satan to expel Satan. Girard insists, though, that one should not condemn the powers blindly:

In a world that is alien to the kingdom of God, they are indispensable to the maintenance of order...St. Paul says the powers exist because they have a role to play as authorized by God...He recommends that Christians respect them and even honor them as long as they require nothing contrary to the Christian faith.⁹²

He continues saying it is not that the powers are evil in and of themselves; it is that the powers claim a false transcendence that makes them evil or satanic. Satan is always trying to usurp God’s power. So, Girard is saying that if we recognized the powers, even if we gave way to the powers (as they are useful to a certain degree to restore harmony), this is fine. “Although it has roots in deception, the false transcendence of violent religion is effective as long as all the members of the community respect and obey it.”⁹³ But we should not think that there is anything divine about them or that the rituals of sacrifice have anything to do with connection to the real sacred.

This leads one to ask what kind of earthly movement would be of God instead of Satan? Certainly not a culture founded on sacrifice and murder. For Girard, sacrifice may be understood as the foundation of “religion”; but it is not of

⁹⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, 97.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

the true God. There is the need for a new foundation and the adoption of rituals that connect one back not to murder and prohibition, but to life and creativity – to the idea expressed above (and which we will explore more below) called “positive mimesis.”

Conclusion: Modern Concern for Victims

Girard does not offer anything akin to “positive mimesis” in *I See Satan*, but he does spend several chapters discussing the development of humanity’s concern for victims in the wake of Christianity. “Wherever Christianity spreads, mythical systems decay and sacrificial rites disappear,” he says, “What does Christianity do now?”⁹⁴ For Girard, Christianity provides a type of information unknown to previous societies. We now understand forms of oppression and persecution in a way ancient societies did not. Ancient societies did not notice them or just saw them as inevitable. According to Girard, this understanding, which is fundamentally biblical, comes to light in the modern usage of the term “scapegoat.”⁹⁵

Girard points out several typical forms scapegoating takes today (e.g. the wife for the boss)—they are not hard to identify; victims, he says, are substituted for the real object of anger, and scapegoats continue to play an important role in our society. But, he continues, our use of them is 90% spoiled because we know

⁹⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁵ Girard provides definitions of a scapegoat in *I See Satan* as follows: 1) the victim of the ritual described in Leviticus; 2) all the victims of similar rituals known as rituals of expulsion; 3) all the phenomena of un-ritualized collective transference that we observe or believe we observe around us (160). In the Hebrew Bible, the scapegoat is quite literal—it is a goat onto which the sins of the community are transferred. The goat’s taking on the sins of the community is facilitated, further, by the nasty reputation of the goat, which smelled bad and was known for sexual promiscuity (154-5). In the New Testament, Jesus is not referred to as a scapegoat, but a lamb of God. This disassociates Jesus from the reputation of the goat, and replaces it with an animal connoting salvation, innocence, and sacrifice (156). Girard points out that the modern usage and understanding of scapegoats is a reflection of biblical consciousness. For a detailed history of the term scapegoat, see David Dawson, *Flesh Becomes Word: A Lexicography of the Scapegoat or, the History of an Idea* (MI: State University Press, 2013).

what we are doing and, further, the action of scapegoating is morally reprehensible to us. To have a moral consciousness that cannot tolerate scapegoating has caused a different kind of violence where we do not hunt the scapegoats; rather we are hunters of those who scapegoat.⁹⁶ This is, of course, just a new way of scapegoating; but for Girard, this new way of scapegoating means that we have at least learned something from the Jewish and Christian revelations. "The most effective power of transformation is not revolutionary violence but the modern concern for victims. What pervades this concern and makes it effective is a true knowledge of oppression and persecution."⁹⁷ For Girard, our evolution is dependent upon the elimination of the permanent scapegoat structures that form the foundation of society, and this happens by our becoming aware of them.⁹⁸

Girard goes even further to say that our world is characterized by reproaching our own violence.⁹⁹ Modern society, he says, is characterized by our concern for victims.¹⁰⁰ While I do not disagree with Girard's thought here, I do think, however, that there needs to be some thought put into who exactly one conceives the victim to be in any given situation. Even if we are conscious of oppressive and victimizing mechanisms and structures, it is not easy to always point out who is the victim and who is the persecutor. How do we know who the "real" victim is? Is there one party that is always innocent? In the context of history, the victims seem to fluctuate, as do the persecutors. For example, Jews experience being victims in one context, but are persecutors in another. Early Christians, likewise, were victims, but became the oppressors over time and as they gained political power. Girard asserts that in fact any group with a specific identity structure throughout history will create its scapegoats for, where there is a set identity, there must be those outside of it who provide contrast and "judged"

⁹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan*, 158.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁹⁸ Girard interestingly discusses Hitler and the Holocaust as an effort to erase the concern for the victim from our consciousness.

⁹⁹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 176.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 177.

difference – mimetic rivalry is bound to take hold and move toward reconciliation through a scapegoat sooner or later.

In Girard's trajectory, the Christian revelation causes us to be aware of the scapegoating that we participate in, a system that, as aforementioned, will likely lead to an apocalyptic breakdown. Girard asserts that Jesus distinguishes two types of peace: 1) the one based on principalities and powers, the one we currently know, which is the peace brought about by scapegoats; and 2) the gospels, which bring a different sort of peace. This new sort of peace, however, cannot emerge without disturbing the old peace first, which is so far the only peace at our disposal. Girard claims that apocalyptic is actually rational in the context of this revelation: "Satan will fall like lightning from Heaven" (Luke 10.18) — with the end of Satan's false transcendence and his reign through false accusation and violence, there will be an end to scapegoating and, in turn, an end to the foundation of our own culture. For Girard, Satan will have nothing left to do but unleash himself at this point; but for human beings, importantly, there can be no reverting to the single victim mechanism. Essential for Girard is the idea that we not revert to the single victim mechanism, but that we radically break out of the old pattern and raise up the voice of the unjustly accused victim. And for this, we need something that pulls us toward it—something that breaks us out of our old cycle. The resurrection, for Girard, is what can provide this—it is the model for what must happen in the world. The *paraclete* is also the force that compels us to move beyond the current and destructive mimetic cycle. The paraclete, for Girard, is the antidote to Satan.

Where Can Judaism Meet with Girard?

Girard is consistent through all of his works in his assertion that the Hebrew Scriptures were the first to diagnose the problem of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. For Girard, the authors of the Tanakh attempted a radical

revelation of these phenomena through a set of texts that speak in the voice of the victim. Certain stories in the Tanakh are key texts for Girard. The warring sibling stories of Genesis, the Book of Job along with the Psalms, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, are texts highlighting victimage and persecution. The narrative cycle of Joseph also demonstrates the mechanism, and reveals an alternative model to reciprocal violence through forgiveness. Importantly, Girard also demonstrates the Hebrew movement away from idolatry, that is, the false sacred, in Joseph's specifically denying his divinity (which would have completed the arc of the "pagan" sacred) and instead affirming his humanity.¹⁰¹ Forgiveness, in the Tanakh, is a very human quality, as it is a divine quality. The *humanization* of the victim, therefore, replaces the generation of a sacred born out of violence.¹⁰²

Girard is not satisfied with the Hebrew revelation, though. While they make powerful strides toward uncovering human's entrapment in violence, Girard asserts that they never completely remove violence from the sacred and thus pose a mediocre at best revelation of the non-violent God. According to Girard, the Hebrew Bible only partially reveals the mimetic cycle—it contains the first two parts, but is missing the third part, which is indeed the sacralization of the sacrificial victim. Choosing to *humanize* the victim instead of *deify* the victim unfortunately, for Girard, does not sufficiently unmask the violent mentality that creates gods to blame for our own aggression. In the Hebrew revelation, Girard says, the victim never rises again; God is never victimized and the victim is never divinized. Viewing the Hebrew scripture in want of a deified victim will certainly leave one dissatisfied.

The Hebrew Bible has its own way of reconciling the "deified" victim within its own belief system, though. I suggest one way this is done is in the concept of holiness. In the Hebrew Bible we learn of a particular place in the ancient temple

¹⁰¹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 119.

¹⁰² Two scholars that have made contributions of import to the Girardian interpretation of the Joseph cycle are James G. Williams and Sandor Goodhart. See James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), 71-103; and Sandor Goodhart, "I am Joseph," in *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 99-121.

that was called the *kipporet*. The *kipporet* was a literal “seat of holiness”; sacrifices were offered on the it, and it was believed to be the meeting place of the divine and the human, the place of greatest presence of the deity. Over time, the seat of holiness became associated with the community of Israel, especially as sacrifices become spiritualized and internalized instead of literal.¹⁰³ This idea of the community as the *kipporet* is expressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, by the monastic Qumran community that believed they themselves were the suffering seat of holiness; through their suffering all the world would be redeemed. But the Jews in more general terms also developed the idea of the chosen ones – that is, the Jewish people as the ones who will reveal holiness to the world through their own example of communal trials and suffering. It would not at all be inappropriate to state that the victimization of the Hebrews in the Scriptures reveal the mimetic cycle and victim mechanism of which Girard is speaking. The “chosen” nation, too, emerges, literally as resurrected, on numerous occasions. They are, for example, reborn out of slavery in the Exodus; and they are saved from extermination in the Book of Esther—literally given life when death seemed inevitable. For the Hebrews, these were indeed miracles. The Hebrew victims become the victors; the oppressed become a people in covenant with God. Even if the Hebrews do not illustrate the divinization of victims, the victim is valorized. It seems that one could demonstrate the full movement of Girard’s mechanism in the Hebrew Scriptures from victim to holy in this way.¹⁰⁴

While the “resurrection” of the victim is an important theme that would be a substantial topic for further study, (and emerges implicitly throughout this study), my goal here is neither to press the Hebrew revelation into a Christian (or

¹⁰³ See Michael Fishbane for a history of the spiritualization of sacrifice in Judaism. Michael Fishbane, “Aspects of the Transformation of Sacrifice in Judaism,” in Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart, eds., *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 114-139.

¹⁰⁴ James G. Williams has written an excellent Girardian exposition on the text of the Exodus (and other key texts from the Tanakh including Joseph, as said above) in his book *The Bible Violence, and the Sacred*, but I do think that he, like Girard, misses this point. See James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), 71-103.

alternatively “pagan”) paradigm, nor prove that literal or symbolic resurrection is even necessary for a text to reveal Girard’s mechanism. The next three chapters will address three different texts from the Tanakh in an effort to test the compatibility of Girard and Judaism. I have done my best to let the texts speak narratively, structurally, and theologically -- in a way that complements the interdisciplinary expertise of Girard—but free of the theological requirements of Christianity that Girard brings to his own exegesis.

Contra Girard, I assert and will demonstrate that Judaism has recognized, revealed, and tried to rectify the problems of mimetic desire and scapegoating with substantial effect. In talking about how Judaism has addressed the mechanism, however, one must necessarily put on a different set of glasses, speak in a different vocabulary, and think from a different theological vantage point; we must, if you will, address Judaism on its own terms. Recalling the story of Joseph again, for example, *humanizing* the victim *does* stop the cycle in its tracks, and does not succumb to what might be a human inclination to deify and idolatize. The Hebrew Scriptures, as we will see in the coming chapters, puts a stronghold on human inclinations through emphases on study, reading (and hearing) Torah, self and communal effort and discipline, and ritual practice. Rather than placating certain “habits” if you will, the following chapters will show “antidotes” to mimetic rivalry and violence that focus on mental awareness, transforming models of thought, and exerting self-control. Each text and corresponding ritual offers a vaccine to help one remember the satanic operations of the mechanism, and in addition prescribes how to go about managing and transforming humanity’s crisis of violence.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Vaccine: Jacob's *Birkhat ha-Banim* and the Jewish Sabbath¹⁰⁵

Dear God,
Maybe Cain and Abel would not have killed each other if they had their own rooms. That's what my Mom did for me and my brother.

–Larry¹⁰⁶

In *Violence and the Sacred* (V&S), Rene Girard remarks that when we think of siblings, we often think of affectionate relationships.¹⁰⁷ He then proposes, however, that the stories that have come down to us through mythology and sacred scriptures often tell us otherwise. Warring siblings are embedded deeply in history, religion and literature: Girard lists Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneices, Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lion-Hearted and John Lackland, as just a few examples of the fraternal rivalry in our collective consciousness. The rivalries are so pervasive that Girard declares: “the theme itself is a form of violence.”¹⁰⁸ In both V&S and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard demonstrates how the biblical voice is groundbreaking in its exposure of mimesis and the sacrificial mechanism. Alongside this assertion, in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (*Things Hidden*), Girard states:

¹⁰⁵ An earlier version of this Article originally appeared in *Contagion*, Vol. 19 (2012): 19-39, under the title “The Jewish Vaccine Against Mimetic Desire.” Copyright © 2012 by Michigan State University.

¹⁰⁶ Accessed July 2013, http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/Spiritual_Humor.html.

¹⁰⁷ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 61.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

I think it is possible to show that the texts of the Gospels manage to achieve what the Old Testament leaves incomplete. These texts therefore serve as an extension of the Judaic bible, bringing to completion an enterprise that the Judaic bible did not take far enough, as Christian tradition has always maintained.¹⁰⁹

Girard's expressed supersessionism, according to Sandor Goodhart, manages only to scapegoat the Hebrew Scriptures that are themselves responsible for revealing Girard's hypothesis. Goodhart states in his article entitled "I am Joseph":

In opposing the Old Testament to the New, in reading the old God as the sacrificial God of vengeance and anger and the new as the anti-sacrificial God of love, have we not unwittingly already slipped into the very structure we have wished to displace, believing in a new law or a 'part two' which it has already been by definition, as it were, the goal of the Old Testament itself to reveal to us, an Old Testament which is thus that much richer by virtue of having foreseen our sacrificial misunderstanding of it.¹¹⁰

Goodhart raises an extremely strong point in emphasizing the strength of the sacrificial way of thinking that has dominated humankind since, as Girard would say, "the foundation of the world." In the same way that Girard here sacrifices the Old Testament for its new sibling, brothers in Genesis do precisely the same. We seem to have this revelation before our eyes, but this violent mentality still exerts its iron grip on us.

Using both the Tanakh and the rabbinic tradition, (culling from the early rabbinic *midrash* and/or the *talmudim* unless otherwise specified), I will demonstrate that, contra Girard, ancient Judaism did indeed "reveal," address, and even attempt (and I believe successfully) to provide antidotes for mimetic

¹⁰⁹ Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 158.

¹¹⁰ Sandor Goodhart, "I am Joseph: Rene Girard and the Prophetic Law", in *Violence and Truth*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 62-3.

rivalry. We will also see, though, how even the early rabbis, like Girard, and indeed also the early Christians – all recipients of the biblical revelation of scapegoating violence—fail to stay in touch with its message and fall back into habitual sacrificial modes of thought. I will demonstrate this throughout the chapter, specifically through an analysis of Genesis 48 in which Jacob blesses his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh, and its corresponding ritual of the *Birkhat ha-Banim* (“Blessing of the Children”).¹¹¹

The two sons of Joseph, the brothers Ephraim and Manasseh, are deserving of a Girardian analysis as a prominent sibling pair in the Book of Genesis that goes on to future prominence in Israelite history. Any analysis of this pair in Girard or secondary sources is absent, and likely due to their protracted role in Genesis.¹¹² These brothers are blessed by their grandfather, Jacob, as two of the future twelve tribes of Israel; but despite their historical import, these brothers play a very minor narrative role in Genesis. Indeed, after Jacob blesses them, the book ends (possibly because there is no conflict to drive the tale). Ephraim and Manasseh are the only peaceful brothers we encounter in Genesis, and it may be no coincidence that they arrive on the scene at the tail end of this book; they do not engage in the kind of mimetic competition of the brothers that came before them. Did Girard overlook this *absence* of rivalry? This, I assert, is precisely why this story is of Girardian import and needs to be addressed.

Perhaps not coincidentally, these brothers also occupy a central role in Jewish ritual: Jews bless their children every week on the Sabbath, asking that God make their sons “like Ephraim and Manasseh.” This ritual, I propose, is the weekly Jewish vaccine used to keep negative mimetic inclinations in check. I will

¹¹¹ Also, it is important to address how Jewish texts and rabbinic thought interpret the mechanism of which Girard speaks on their own terms. We must start with the assumption that every religion is whole and complete in itself. If Girard is correct, and if mimetic rivalry and sacrificial violence is a universally applicable theory at the heart of religion, every religious tradition must be capable on its own to reveal this mechanism, and propose a way to help its followers out of the sacrificial snare. To show this in terms of Judaism is, indeed, one primary aim of this paper.

¹¹² The one exception is James G., Williams, who mentions Ephraim and Manasseh as a sibling pair of Genesis, but provides no analysis of their presence or function in the narrative or in Jewish ritual. See Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 60.

propose that it is even more than this, too; that it is, in fact, a “peace” vaccine meant to proactively generate a new kind of order.¹¹³ The structure of the book of Genesis invites such a conclusion; the rabbinic explanations of Ephraim and Manasseh and the purpose of the Sabbath underscore it (as I will demonstrate). My ultimate goal is to determine to what extent this text and its ritual can really be effective in releasing humans from the sacrificial mentality. I will examine how it operates in a particularist manner, on one hand, as sustenance for Jewish identity; and, on the other hand, how it is intended to operate universally for the transformation of human nature itself.

The *Birkhat ha-Banim*, “Blessing of the Children”

To summarize the narrative: toward the end of the Book of Genesis (Genesis 48), Joseph brings his two children, Ephraim and Manasseh, to see Jacob who is dying. Jacob tells Joseph in this scene that he will make Joseph’s two sons as his own, and asks Joseph to bring his children forward so that he might bless them. When Joseph brings them over, he is careful to place Manasseh, the older of the two brothers, before Jacob’s right hand (the right hand is traditionally the hand of spiritual primacy), and Ephraim before his left. Jacob, however, crosses his hands so that his right hand is placed on the head of Ephraim and his left on the head of Manasseh.¹¹⁴ Joseph tries to correct what he perceives to be his father’s mistake, but Jacob knows what he is doing: Manasseh, he says, will have a great future, but Ephraim will be the greater of the two. Jacob then declares that “By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: ‘God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh’”¹¹⁵ (Gen. 48.20a). This is known in Judaism as the

¹¹³ The analysis of the *Birkhat ha-Banim* as a “peace” vaccine, however, will be detailed in chapter five.

¹¹⁴ The right hand is the preferred hand for the giving of *mitvos* (blessings) as it is associated with more spiritual power. See Rabbi Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Chumash* (NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1993, 1994), 272.

¹¹⁵ All biblical quotes are taken from the Jewish Publication Society’s new translation of the *Tanakh* unless otherwise noted. See Jewish Publication Society, trans., *The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

“Blessing of the Children” (Heb.: *Birkhat ha-Banim*) and is repeated in ritual form every week by parents and rabbis on the Jewish Sabbath.

Jacob’s blessing of his grandchildren is called the “blessing of all blessings,” and is one that is given a place of importance in Jewish ritual.¹¹⁶ Jewish tradition places great emphasis on parental blessings in general. We might think of Isaac and Esau’s encounter after Jacob received Isaac’s blessing in place of his brother: “When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing and said to his father, ‘Bless me too, Father!’...‘Have you not reserved a blessing for me?...Bless me too, Father!’ And Esau wept aloud” (Gen. 27.34, 36b, 38b). Isaac has no more blessings to give, and Esau feels the deep physical and spiritual loss. This feeling of loss was acute, too, for a blessing is effective language—blessings create reality and carve out a future for the one being blessed. The parental blessing is considered prophetic in this respect –it is a linguistic blueprint for the protection and rewards the divine will provide. What the blessing articulates is the future being prepared for the children.¹¹⁷

The narratives that tell the stories of these blessings being passed from parents to sons in the Tanakh, though, are not straightforward. In our example of Jacob’s blessing of his grandchildren above, Jacob deliberately crosses his arms to give the greater blessing to the younger son. As the younger of two brothers himself, Jacob had to steal his birthright and blessing by deceit; one might conjecture here that perhaps Jacob, in blessing Ephraim and Manasseh as he does, is trying to rectify history – not only by ensuring that both children receive a blessing (poor Esau who never received one), but also by passing on the blessing to the younger son openly, legitimately and without the need for deceit.

¹¹⁶ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* states: “The blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh will be the standard by which all blessings are measured.” Walter J. Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 81.

¹¹⁷ When inquiring into the confusion regarding who received his blessing, Isaac declares about Jacob: “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came and I blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!” (Gen. 27.33) After the destruction of the second temple, and the death of the priesthood in Judaism, the religious traditions changed to accommodate the Jews’ new circumstances. One change consists in parents becoming *kohanim* (priests) and, as such, direct transmitters of divine blessings. Whereas the Birkhat ha-Banim had once been uttered by the Temple priests, it is now uttered and made effective by parents.

What Jacob does, from a literary point of view, is a beautiful completion of his past—it is perhaps how Jacob, in retrospect, would have liked his father to carry out this ritual.

Referencing Girard, though, it is crucial to point out what Jacob's prior deceit means in terms of mimesis and its consequential sacrificial violence. In V&S, Girard points out how Jacob's deceit is in his pretending to be his brother so that he might "steal" Esau's blessing and birthright. To accomplish this, Jacob must slaughter an animal, cook a stew out of the meat (to feed Isaac his father), and cover himself with the skin to feign Esau's body hair (for when Isaac embraces him). From a Girardian standpoint, the mimetic rivalry is obvious—these are brothers competing for a birthright and blessing that they think will somehow grant them a *being* they desire. This rivalry escalates to the point of mimetic doubling through Jacob's literally disguising himself as his brother. Finally we have the presence of the sacrificial animal that serves, for Girard, as a kind of "protection"—the animal is the scapegoated victim who receives the violence in the place of those involved in the conflict. Girard points out two forms of substitution at play here: "one brother for another, and that of animal for a man."¹¹⁸

The kids serve in two different ways to dupe the father—or, in other terms, to divert from the son the violence directed toward him. In order to receive the father's blessing rather than his curse, Jacob must present to Isaac the freshly slaughtered kids made into a "savory meat." Then the son must seek refuge, literally, in the skins of the sacrificed animals. The animals thus interpose themselves between father and son. They serve as a sort of insulation, preventing the direct contact that could only lead to violence.¹¹⁹

Girard distinguishes the "strange deception" underlying this sacrificial substitution. He discusses how while the narrative gives us a glimpse into the kind of deception that is occurring, it does not however speak specifically about

¹¹⁸ Girard, V&S, 5.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

it. It half reveals, and half conceals. “There is reason to believe that the narrative touches upon the mythic origins of the sacrificial system.”¹²⁰

Regarding Jacob’s role and character, Girard states: “The figure of Jacob has long been linked with the devious character of sacrificial violence” and Girard links him to Odysseus who, like Jacob, executes a “splendid ruse” via animal fur.¹²¹ Girard’s analysis and analogy, based on the Jacob/Esau tale, may be apt. But I assert that Jacob’s role in the later narrative blessing Ephraim and Manasseh is not so clear; and thus Girard’s characterization of Jacob is perhaps premature.¹²² In the later narrative of Genesis 48, Jacob is deliberately repeating the past in one sense—he once again shakes up the family hierarchy by bestowing the greater blessing on the younger brother. From a Girardian standpoint this is reminiscent of the bacchanal or festival in which social roles are swapped and a society totters on the edge of plunging itself into the danger of a mimetic crisis leading to sacrifice. For Girard, the presence of brothers in and of themselves (in particular twins) embodies the danger of the effacement of difference and mimetic crisis.¹²³ So perhaps Jacob might be said, here, to be a kind of trickster—the one that deliberately tries to stir up rivalry. Yet perhaps Jacob’s intention is not this at all. Jacob breaks from the past by blessing both of the children; his action is free from the constraints of past tradition, and illustrates an awareness grounded in abundance.¹²⁴ Jacob is also deliberate in his movement in such a way as to “reveal” the constraining mechanism. By reversing the hierarchy, Jacob is drawing attention to its acute potential for chaos.

And yet no chaos ensues. This narrative is missing elements of the sibling narratives preceding it: it is above board; there is no deceit; there is no

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Girard seems to interpret the whole of Jacob’s character in light of his usurpation of Esau’s blessing. Jacob’s narrative throughout Genesis, however, details Jacob’s transformation, especially in Genesis 32 when Jacob wrestles with an angel (or perhaps God) and is renamed “Israel.” Our ritual, the Birkhat ha-Banim, is based on the event of Jacob’s blessing of his grandchildren in Genesis 48, post-transformation.

¹²³ Ibid., 63-4.

¹²⁴ This notion will be discussed further below.

rivalry; there is no sacrificial substitution; there is no victim. This narrative reveals the mechanism and at the same time provides an alternative. Even if one insists that Jacob's character remains devious, the brothers Ephraim and Manasseh have much to teach us from their response. But I will assert below that there is much to learn from Jacob as a model as well. This narrative is one of great significance for Jews, though it seems to have achieved little if no recognition from the other biblical religions. What exactly did the Jews see in the narrative that prompted them to ritualize it and ask God to make their children like Ephraim and Manasseh? Why do they not name Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Moses? A look at rabbinic interpretation of the figures of Ephraim and Manasseh will yield deeper understanding of how they are linked to the idea of transcending mimetic rivalry and moving out of the sacrificial system.

History of Interpretation of Ephraim and Manasseh: Who Are They?

Ephraim and Manasseh, having received their blessings from Jacob, are elevated to the status of his children, and they take their places as two of the twelve tribes of Israel in the remaining books of the Tanakh, replacing Joseph and Levi. There are many strands of tradition that interpret the figures of Ephraim and Manasseh, and I will review just a few of these here, mostly with regard to Ephraim.

First, some interpreters have looked at the Hebrew canon as a whole, and have determined that Jacob's blessing in Genesis is merely a later interpolation meant to justify or explain what comes later on, that is, the preeminence of Ephraim in comparison to his older brother, and the naming of Ephraim before Manasseh when they are named together. Thus, there is an aetiological significance ascribed to this narrative. This has been a popular historical critical interpretation of the passage containing Jacob's blessing, and also an interpretation that validates the gift of prophecy attributed to Jacob.

Indeed it does seem Jacob was prophetic, too—there is a much deeper and more complex tradition history around Ephraim than there is around Manasseh. There is a prime similarity, though, in how both figures denote a break from the past. Joseph names his first child Manasseh because, he declares, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” (Gen. 41.51) The “hardship” and “parental home” refers to the animosity and violence to which Joseph was subject by his brothers. Here, in naming Manasseh (meaning “forgetting”), he is letting go of the rivalries with his brothers – getting closure on his past so to speak—and this becomes important later on when he meets his brothers again and relinquishes his need for vengeance. Through Manasseh, one might say Joseph reconciles his past and breaks the cycle of violence just as Jacob reconciles his past and breaks the cycle of violence in blessing both of his grandchildren. The allusions brought forth at the end of Genesis are both of ends and new beginnings.

But there is even more to it than this when we start to delve into the figure of Ephraim. In Tanakh, Ephraim goes from being the son of Joseph to a tribal head; to the most powerful tribe of northern kingdom; to a symbol of the northern kingdom itself; to a symbol of the entire people.¹²⁵ In the Book of Jeremiah 31.9, the figure of Ephraim takes on theological overtones: “For I am ever a father to Israel/Ephraim is My first-born”; Ephraim becomes Yahweh’s precious child.¹²⁶ We must look even deeper at the significance of this figure.

Following the “clues” laid down in the Tanakh, Ephraim appears in rabbinic texts as an apocalyptic figure, even attaining the status of a messiah.¹²⁷ Ephraim becomes an eschatological figure within the context of what is commonly referred to as the “two-Messiah theory”: the first messiah would be a descendent of Ephraim known as the “Messiah *ben* Joseph”; the second messiah would be a descendent of David, known as the “Messiah *ben* David.”

¹²⁵ An excellent overview of the “rise” of Ephraim can be found in Samuel Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 149-174.

¹²⁶ “Is Ephraim my dear son?/Is he the child I delight in?” (Jeremiah 31.20)

¹²⁷ Certain passages in the Tanakh are interpreted as referring to a figure or figures known as Messiah *ben* Joseph or Messiah *ben* Ephraim, e.g. Zechariah 12.10; Deuteronomy 33.17, on which the rabbis based their commentaries.

According to scholar David Mitchell, the Messiah ben Joseph (with whom we are most concerned here) goes by various names including “Messiah *ben* Ephraim,” and sometimes, just “Ephraim.”¹²⁸ I will refer to this messiah from this point on as the Messiah ben Joseph, which seems to be his most common designation. Mitchell adds that there are references to the Messiah ben Joseph “in rabbinic literature of all periods and genres.”¹²⁹ Ephraim thus has quite an important legacy within Jewish thought through the ages. How does Ephraim (a.k.a. Messiah *ben* Joseph) fulfill this role as a messiah, and how does this play into our Girardian understanding of the Genesis 48 narrative and its corresponding Birkhat ha-Banim?

In general, Judaism presents the confluence of three types of messianic ideas: conservative; restorative; and utopian. Conservative has to do with maintaining the ritual prescriptions of the Torah; restorative has to do with the return to what is perceived to be an idyllic past; utopian has to do with the attainment of a future idyllic state (giving way to the apocalyptic visions).¹³⁰ The exact nature of each of these messianic ideas is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the main emphasis behind all three types is that there must be a tangible, material change in history.¹³¹

Redemption, in mainline Judaism, is not just inward, but seen. The Messiah ben David, as we will see, is this material change in history. But very early strands of Judaism, and some would argue passages in the Tanakh, include a view that humankind must change internally before material change is

¹²⁸ According to David Mitchell, there are a number of ways of referring to the messiah I am calling the *Messiah ben Ephraim* or the *Messiah ben Joseph* in this paper: 1) “Messiah bar Ephraim” or “the King Messiah of the House of Joseph of the House of Ephraim,” as in the Targums; 2) “Messiah ben Ephraim,” as in the Aramaic *Zohar* and various additional texts (see full list in Mitchell’s article); 3) and even “a man of Ephraim *ben* Joseph” as in *Pirkei Hekhalot Rabbati*. Mitchell points out that the Messiah ben Ephraim is interchangeable with the Messiah ben Joseph as a descendent of Ephraim is automatically a descendent of Joseph, who was Ephraim’s father. See David C. Mitchell, “Messiah Ben Joseph: A Sacrificing Atonement for Israel,” in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 10.1 (2007), 86-87.

¹²⁹ According to the JewishEncyclopedia.com, the earliest mention of the Messiah ben Joseph is in three statements attributed to Rabbi Dosa, in *Suk. 52a, b.*, which I will discuss in detail below. See “Messiah,” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (2002-2011), accessed June 10, 2010, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10729-messiah>.

¹³⁰ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 2.

¹³¹ Ibid.

possible. The Messiah ben Joseph is given the task of effecting this internal change. Mitchell, in his article “Messiah Ben Joseph: A Sacrifice of Atonement for Israel,” discusses the rabbinic commentaries on this figure ranging from the early Tannaitic period through the seventeenth century.¹³² Not surprisingly, Mitchell discusses not only the various references to this figure, but its significance as an atoning and redeeming sacrifice for Israel.¹³³

In his article, Mitchell moves backwards through time, first citing examples from the renaissance to demonstrate how the Messiah ben Joseph has been construed as an atoning sacrifice for Israel. Mitchell draws on a group of commentators who link the Messiah ben Joseph with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, for example, Isaiah Horowitz (c. 1555-1630) and, before him, Naphtali ben Asher Altschuler (c. 1607).¹³⁴ Mitchell draws out how both writers emphasize the innocence of this messiah, and the “severe” penalty that he pays on behalf of Israel.¹³⁵ Mitchell then brings in Samuel b. Abraham Laniado ha-Darshan (d. 1605) to corroborate the notion of the Messiah ben Joseph’s vicarious suffering: “for he was...slain for the transgression of my people, the stroke intended for them being borne by him instead (v. 8)... Such is the sense of these verses, according to the opinion of those of our sages who apply them to the Messiah ben David, and to Messiah ben Joseph, who comes from Ephraim.”¹³⁶ Laniado ha-Darshan, significantly, draws on the sages in his interpretation here, in particular citing Rashi.¹³⁷ This implies that there is a continuous thread of interpreting the Suffering Servant of Isaiah as the Messiah ben Joseph in this fashion through the generations.

¹³² David C. Mitchell, “Messiah Ben Joseph”, 77-94.

¹³³ Mitchell writes this article against those scholars who have dismissed the idea of Messiah ben Joseph as an atoning sacrifice for a variety of reasons. For example, Klausner dismisses the idea claiming it came about due to Christian influence; Rowley denies any connection between the Messiah ben Joseph and the suffering Servant of Isaiah 52-53; Castelli denies that there is proof of suffering before his death; etc. I am persuaded by Mitchell’s view, and the antiquity of the theme. See Mitchell, “Messiah Ben Joseph”, 78.

¹³⁴ Both of these writers identify the Messiah ben Joseph as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and clearly defend that there is a scriptural basis for the vicarious suffering and atoning death of this messiah.

¹³⁵ Mitchell, “Messiah Ben Joseph”, 79.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

To conclude the renaissance literature on Messiah ben Joseph, Mitchell draws on Moses Alshekh (1507-after 1593), who asserts that the Messiah ben Joseph can also be identified with the “pierced” one of Zechariah 12.10—the one who takes on the guilt and sins of all of Israel, and is slain in battle. Both Alshekh and his contemporaries cited above discuss the vicarious suffering and atonement of the Messiah ben Joseph in a fashion that is suggestive of an ancient tradition rooted in the Tanakh.¹³⁸

Mitchell moves backwards in time to 1280-90 to discuss the mention of Messiah ben Joseph in the *Zohar*. Interestingly, the *Zohar* discusses the Messiah ben Joseph as both dying and not dying. In the passages where he dies (e.g., the description of the Messiah in the Garden of Eden from *Vayyaqhel*), the Messiah is described as taking on the sins and sicknesses of all of Israel, thus relieving Israel of the “punishments of the Torah.” In the passages in which the Messiah ben Joseph does not die, it is stated that the “Faithful Shepherd” shall die in his place. In either case, it is only of import here to underscore the necessity of a death for the atonement and healing of Israel to occur. Presumably, the Messiah ben Joseph would need to die if the “Faithful Shepherd” were not available for the undertaking, as Mitchell points out.

The Geonic period is next, covering approximately the tenth century of the Common Era. Mitchell cites two primary works in this section: the midrash *Nistarot Rav Shimon ben Yohai*; and Saadia Gaon’s *Kitab al-‘amanat wal-’itiqadat*. Both of these works, like the later commentaries, assert the Messiah ben Joseph’s connection to suffering and sin, but in a slightly different fashion. Mitchell cites from the midrash *Nistarot*: “If they are not pure, Messiah ben Ephraim will come; and if they are pure, Messiah ben David will come.”¹³⁹ Saadia asserts the same view declaring that the repentant and righteous will

¹³⁸ Mitchell points to the pre-Common Era origins of the Ephrite Messiah as well through its connection in rabbinic writings to suffering servant passages in Isaiah as well as the pierced hero passage in Zechariah. Mitchell takes the notion of the sacrificial and atoning messiah even farther back in locating its source in Moses’ blessing of Joseph in Deuteronomy 33.13-17. Mitchell declares that the characteristics of this sacrificial and atoning messianic figure were well-established in ancient Israel, even before the onset of Christianity. See Mitchell, “Messiah Ben Joseph”, 94.

¹³⁹ Mitchell, “Messiah ben Joseph,” 84.

bring on Messiah *ben* David; Messiah ben Joseph will come only to the unrighteous as a “refiner’s fire.”¹⁴⁰ It is clear from these two interpreters that the Messiah ben Ephraim appears only within the context of sin; his main purpose is to cleanse of sin so as to pave the way for the Messiah ben David. Mitchell points out that neither of these writers specifically discusses the Messiah ben Ephraim as an atoning sacrifice, nor do they mention how the Messiah ben Ephraim will carry out the purification. But it is clear that the role of Messiah ben Ephraim is to appear in the context of sin for the sake of atonement.

After a brief mention of *Sefer Zerubbabel* (which I do not deem necessary to reiterate here), Mitchell moves farther back into the 5th and 6th centuries—to the *Pesikta Rabbati*. I am citing here the first passage in *pisqa* 36.1 not just for how it, as the above texts, links Messiah ben Ephraim to the vanquishing of sin, but also to begin to connect it to Girard’s theological ideas in *I See Satan*. The *pisqa* is as follows:

And when he saw him, Satan was shaken, and he fell upon his face and said: Surely this is the Messiah who will cause me and all the angels of the nations to be swallowed up in Gehenna, as it is said, *He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces* (Is. 25.8). In that hour the angels of the nations, in agitation, will say to him: Master of the Universe, who is this through whose power we are to be swallowed up? What is his name? What kind of a being is he? The Holy One, blessed be he, will reply: He is the Messiah, and his name is Ephraim Messiah, my righteousness.¹⁴¹

Mitchell comments here: “Messiah Ephraim’s sufferings effect destruction of cosmic evil. By his sufferings Satan and the fallen angels who mislead the nations are consigned to Gehenna.”¹⁴² This passage brings the destruction of sin to a theological level, destroying not just sin itself, but that which tempts humankind into sin. We will refer later back to the Messiah ben Ephraim’s

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴² Ibid.

connections to Girard, but it is crucial to make a preliminary comment about Girard's theological assertion in *I See Satan*, in which Girard declares the cycle of mimetic desire and scapegoating to be a "satanic cycle" keeping humankind entrapped in a cycle of violence—expelling "Satan through Satan"—that is, using violence to avert violence. Here we have a very preliminary glimpse of how the life and death of the Messiah ben Ephraim is a type of Jewish "Passion" meant to release humanity from its cycle of sin and death. This understanding of the Messiah ben Ephraim as the one who releases humanity from the grasp of Satan also underscores the second messiah, the Messiah ben David, as the one who appears in a context of purity.

Mitchell, last, moves even farther back in time to the earliest direct mention of the Messiah ben Joseph and the Messiah ben David by name, which appears in *Tractate Sukkah* of the Babylonian Talmud (commonly called the Bavli).¹⁴³ The Messiah ben Joseph specifically appears three times in this tractate, which is of particular import within the body of rabbinic writings in general because of its early composition. (The Bavli was compiled during the first through fifth centuries of the Common Era; Mitchell indicates a date for the particular material below as mid-first century CE.) Page 52 of *Sukkah* presents the following debate:

"And the land shall mourn family by family apart. The family of the House of David apart and their women apart" (Zech. 12.12). They said: Is not this an a fortiori conclusion? In an age to come, when they are busy mourning and no evil inclination rules them, the Torah says, "the men apart and the women apart." How much more so now when they are busy rejoicing and the evil inclination rules them. *What is the cause of this mourning? Rabbi Dosa and the rabbis differ. One says: "For Messiah ben Joseph who is slain;" and the other says: "For the evil inclination which is slain." It is well according to him who says, "For Messiah ben Joseph who is slain," for this is what is written, "And they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him like the mourning for an only son" (Zech. 12.10); but according to him who says, "The evil inclination which is slain:" Is this an occasion for mourning? Is*

¹⁴³ B. Suk. 52, in *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Rabbi Dr. I Epstein (London: Soncino, Press, 1935-1948), accessed April 29, 2011, <http://halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Sukkah.pdf>.

it not an occasion for rejoicing rather than weeping? (Following Mitchell, Aramaic passages are in italics).¹⁴⁴

Mitchell explains the origins of this debate in the *Mishnah*, the specifics of which need not concern us here. What is of concern to us is that what we have here is debate over the identity of an object of mourning during the ceremonies held for the Feast of Sukkot: is it the Messiah ben Joseph that is being mourned (as Rabbi Dosa avers); or is it the evil inclination (opine those other than Dosa). The redactor of the tractate upholds Dosa's view, supporting the position with the text of Zechariah 12.10-14, which speaks of "the pierced one" who is mourned.

Sukkah mentions the Messiah *ben* Joseph again just a few paragraphs down the page. In this instance, the rabbis teach (as we have already learned) that the Messiah ben David will come after the Messiah ben Joseph. It states:

The rabbis taught: The Messiah b. David, who (as we hope) will appear in the near future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to him: Ask something of me and I will give it to thee, as it is written [Ps. ii. 7-8]: "I will announce the decree . . . Ask it of me, and I will give," etc. But as the Messiah b. David will have seen that the Messiah b. Joseph who preceded him was killed, he will say before the Lord: Lord of the Universe, I will ask nothing of Thee but life. And the Lord will answer: This was prophesied already for thee by thy father David [Ps. xxi. 5]: "Life hath he asked of thee, thou gavest it to him."¹⁴⁵

The exact nature of the two messiahs are not delineated in this tractate, but we do get the impression that there is not only a slain messiah tradition, but a well-known two-messiah tradition already in place that includes the death of the Messiah ben Joseph succeeded by a Davidic Messiah who is given life. And this, indeed, is the tradition that is further elaborated in the later strands of rabbinic writings we have explored above thanks to Mitchell's exposition.

¹⁴⁴ David C. Mitchell, "Rabbi Dosa and the Rabbis Differ: Messiah Ben Joseph in the Babylonian Talmud," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 8.1 (2005), 77.

¹⁴⁵ B. Suk. 52.

It seems fair, in my estimation, to agree with Mitchell and maintain that there was indeed a two-Messiah theory that began quite early in the history of ancient Israel, (possibly as early as the first century CE), featuring one Messiah who is slain and a second Messiah who lives. In addition, it seems clear in rabbinic interpretation that the Messiah ben Joseph has a specific role to play as the messiah that appears in the context of sin in order to vanquish sin, and thereby pave the way for the Messiah ben David. And it is this--- it is the Messiah ben Joseph's role as one who is slain in the context of sin—even *by* sin—and in order to vanquish sin—that we begin to see how this figure becomes “Girardian” and a possible revelation of the sacrificial violence of which Girard speaks. Is the Messiah ben Joseph, a.k.a. Ephraim, a sacrifice meant to end all sacrifices? Is he meant to break humanity out of its satanic cycle of sacrificial violence? Is this the sacrificial messiah that the world requires before the non-sacrificial messiah and the new world order can arrive?

Aharon Agus also writes of the Messiahs ben Joseph and ben David, with an emphasis on their ontological and theological purposes. For Agus, the two messiahs have very specific roles to play, each one denoting and effectuating a specific occurrence in human being(s) and in the world.¹⁴⁶ Agus fleshes out the significance of a two-messiah theory both in terms of how it relates and tells something of human nature, as well as how it clarifies differing perspectives on deliverance – one perspective being deliverance within history, the other deliverance transcending history.

According to Agus, the way the Messiah ben Joseph will provide deliverance can be interpreted on many levels, all which correlate, and all of which prepare the world for the advent of the subsequent Davidic Messiah. On the most literal level, the Messiah ben Joseph (as aforementioned) is a figure that will cause deliverance of humanity by dying, literally and heroically, in

¹⁴⁶ Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (New York: State University Press, 1988), 208. I am deeply indebted to Agus for his treatment of the Ephraim and Davidic Messiahs, though I refrain here from treating their relationship to martyrdom (which is Agus' primary motivation).

battle.¹⁴⁷ The texts that thus speak of the death of the Messiah ben Joseph may be taken at face value, the death of this messiah being a literal sacrifice, and indeed a “revelatory” sacrifice meant to end sacrifice. (Thus the Davidic messiah will be enabled to live.) Even, therefore, if the death of the Messiah ben Joseph is a literal one, its effect may have many layers: 1) it presents a psychic shock that alerts humankind to the sacrificial mechanism they have been playing out and enables the process to end the sacrificial cycle; 2) it theologically effects atonement for sin, thereby also granting a renewal in humankind and release from the sacrificial cycle; 3) it symbolically represents the death of something in humankind – whether a mentality or sin—that creates a real and tangible difference in human nature itself. Agus confirms that the deliverance of the Messiah ben Joseph must be experienced through cataclysmic suffering, even death, termed the “pangs of the Messiah.”¹⁴⁸ The transformation that will be brought on will be no small change.

The sacrificing death of the Messiah ben Joseph, however, while it has sometimes been understood literally, has also been understood symbolically as either the actual death of the evil inclination (Heb., *yetzer ha-ra*) residing in humans, or as the cause of it.

The *Yetzer ha-Ra* or “Evil Inclination”

Let us turn briefly back to our earlier text from the Bavli that features Rabbi Dosa and the mourning of the Messiah ben Joseph in order to explore the connection between the Messiah ben Joseph and the *yetzer ha-ra*, (which is most often translated as “the evil inclination” or “the evil impulse”). The rabbis in this text (other than Dosa and the redactor) seem to view the evil inclination as separate from the slaying of the Messiah ben Joseph. Mitchell, however, interprets that

¹⁴⁷ In the Middle Ages, Kabbalistic Judaism has often been linked with interpreting the sacrificial death of the Messiah ben Joseph through the lens of martyrdom, misrepresenting what a Girardian interpretation would understand to be an anti-sacrificial revelation. For a detailed discussion of the Messiah ben Joseph and martyrdom, see Agus.

¹⁴⁸ Agus, 208.

Dosa (and the redactor) do not; Dosa and the redactor seem to understand the death of the Messiah ben Joseph as connected to, even causative of, the death of the evil inclination. Mitchell suggests that Zechariah 12.10-14 and 13.1 are the proof-texts declaring how the mourning of the Messiah ben Joseph (as discussed in Zech. 12.10-14) “opened the fountain that slew the evil inclination” (Zech. 13.1, which directly follows Zech. 12.10-14).¹⁴⁹ For Mitchell, we have here not just a passage from the Tanakh, but also a Talmudic source that imply “a causal link between his slaying (i.e. the slaying of the Messiah ben Joseph) and the slaying of the evil *yetzer*.”¹⁵⁰

This suits our purpose in this dissertation, that is, to bring to light Jewish resonance with Girard, as the evil inclination is uncanny in its resemblance to what Girard calls mimetic desire. The evil inclination, in short, is considered a part of creation, and thus “good”; it is said in *Genesis Rabbah* that the evil inclination is what compels us to marry, build a house and trade.¹⁵¹ This inclination is necessary to the workings of the world. A homily by Amora Rav or Rabbi Johanan (the exact source is uncertain) makes clear why the evil inclination is necessary to the world. The homily goes that around the time of the Second Temple, a prayer was circulating to eradicate sexual sin (personified as an attempt to slay the tempter who incites humanity to such). Urbach quotes from this homily: “Said a prophet to them: ‘Beware, you will slay the whole world, if you slay him.’ But then when they needed a fresh laid egg for a sick person, they couldn’t find one! So they let him go after three days.”¹⁵² While the evil inclination is necessary to the workings of the physical world, it is also part of humanity’s base nature, and the impulse that drives humanity toward rivalry, lust and envy. Cain, for example, defended himself before God for having slain Abel by arguing that God had implanted in him the *yetzer ha-ra*.¹⁵³ In *I See Satan*, Girard similarly discusses the intrinsic function of mimetic desire for human

¹⁴⁹ Zechariah 13.1 states: “On that day a fountain shall be opened for the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.”

¹⁵⁰ Agus, 79.

¹⁵¹ *Gen. R.* 9. 9, in Agus, 290.

¹⁵² Ephraim E. Urbach. *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew University, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979), 475.

¹⁵³ *Tan., Bereshit*, 25, ed. Buber, 10, from Agus, 291.

being. Mimetic desire, he asserts, is not in itself bad, even if it is responsible for violent acts that distress us.¹⁵⁴ As Girard points out, if there were no mimesis, our being and actions would be reduced to instinct like the animals. Without mimesis, there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimesis, however, is also what leads humanity into rivalries that, still to this point, produce violence. To correlate Girard's idea with rabbinic language, then, we might postulate that Girard's *mimetic desire* is, if not identical to, at least a very similar concept to what the rabbis call the *evil inclination*.

One finds further correlations between the yetzer ha-ra and Girard's mimesis in terms of the mechanism by which they both operate, as well as how they can be managed. According to the rabbis, our innate evil inclination cannot be denied. We are not, however, supposed to combat it by withdrawing from the world; we must conquer it within the world. The rabbis teach that though the evil inclination was created by God, and may wreak havoc in the world, God also gave man the antidote: "My children, I have created for you the Evil Inclination (but I have at the same time) created for you the Torah as an antidote. As long as you occupy yourselves with the Torah, he (i.e. the evil inclination) shall not have dominion over you..."¹⁵⁵ Similarly, in the School of Rabbi Ishmael it was taught: "My son, if this hideous (wretch) encounters you (i.e., the evil inclination), drag him along to the schoolhouse; if he is of stone, he will dissolve, and if of iron, he will be shattered..."¹⁵⁶ For the rabbis, the evil inclination could only be staved off and disciplined through study of the Torah.

The rabbis also give some indications about the mechanics of the evil inclination, acknowledging its power, and in an attempt to understand its inner workings. For example, rabbinic teachings begin to illustrate how the evil inclination became equated with idolatry—the antithesis, if you will, of Torah. The two teachings above are just two of many Tannaitic teachings that associate the evil inclination with other gods. "The very fact that 'other gods' are identified

¹⁵⁴ Girard, *I See Satan*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew University, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979), 472.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

with the Evil Inclination is evidence of the power attributed to him, and the consoling thought that he would be eradicated in the future was insufficient to put their minds at rest. Many therefore investigated his devices and methods.”¹⁵⁷

What are these methods? One of the primary methods by which the evil inclination operates is in how it begins small but gradually takes over – it is “sweet in the beginning but horrible in the end.”¹⁵⁸ The evil inclination may present itself, for example, as an idea that breaches Torah, but according to one’s own judgment, seems okay. The rabbis point is that this practice will escalate and lead one farther and farther astray, making room for the evil inclination to usurp power over one’s life:

...by doing evil he may become obtuse and the forbidden as permitted and even deprive himself of the possibility of repenting. He may consider the Evil Inclination itself as his god as Rabbi Jannai put it: ‘Whoever listens to his (Evil) Inclination is, as it were, an idolater. What is the reason? ‘There shall no strange god be in thee’....make not the stranger within you sovereign.’¹⁵⁹

The point seems clear: listening to one’s own judgment instead of the Torah is nothing more than bowing to the idol that is one’s own mind. And this happens within humans because of the evil inclination.

The evil inclination is also that which keeps the good inclination in prison, and here it is associated with escalation of anger:¹⁶⁰

‘He that is slow to anger is better than the Mighty, and he that ruleth over his spirit than he that taketh a city.’ (Proverbs 16.32) Ben Zoma also identifies the evil inclination with tendency to anger and impatience: ‘If a man pulls out his hair, rends his garments, breaks his vessels, or scatters his money in his wrath, regard him as no better than an idolater. For if his *yetzer* would have said to him “Go

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 473.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 474.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

and worship idols,” he would have done so, for such is the work of the evil inclination.’¹⁶¹

The main idea here seems to be that the evil inclination gives way to a kind of irrational behavior—a kind of behavior one associates with anger, or a cloudy mind—the opposite of the good inclination which would be Torah-inclined, the sustained ability to reason, study, and keep a clear mind. When the mind is clouded with anger, the good inclination, which would have one study Torah or think reasonably, is kept at bay by the strength of the angry emotion. The concept of the yetzer ha-ra is strikingly similar to the Girard’s concept of mimesis, and so is the effect of mimesis on the mind of humankind—both mimesis and the evil inclination operate in a way that leads to a kind of frenzy, an irrationality, that causes self-deception and clouds the mind. The mechanics of these two principles also seem to correlate.

The rabbis teach of the power of the Torah to help in the struggle against the escalation of the evil inclination; but they also indicate that as long as the Torah is in the possession of man, it is impossible to uproot the evil inclination entirely. It is said that any distance between man and God creates room for the evil inclination to act. The tractate from the Bavli cited above in this chapter, however, recalls a tradition that speaks of the death of the evil inclination in association with a discussion of the Messiah ben Joseph. This reflects a rabbinic tradition that esteems the overcoming of the evil inclination—an accomplishment that will bring on a new way of being in the world. The tradition cites that the slaughtering of the evil inclination is “as if one had sacrificed all the sacrifices together”¹⁶² – this accomplishment will have no small effect. It will be the death, literally, of a part of what is human nature—it will be the death of humanity’s will to power, to idolatrous ways of thinking, to competition and covetousness. The alternative to this cycle of “satan” dominated by the evil inclination (and mimetic rivalry) will be, for Jews, living according to the Torah. The alternative to satanic

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Psalms 51.19; *BT Sanhedrin* 436, in Agus, 291.

living is also conceived as the way of repentance, which calls for strength of will, knowledge and understanding in man's fight against his passions.¹⁶³ Of course, the way of repentance, and the death of the evil inclination, is also the return to God and the doing of His will, as commanded in the Torah.¹⁶⁴ This spiritual, internal slaughtering of this base part of human nature, and the return to the way of repentance, must happen before any type of historical redemption can occur. The slaughtering of the evil inclination is identified, in this line of rabbinic thinking, as the spiritual change first, (i.e. Messiah ben Joseph), which is the necessary pre-condition for the material change sought in history (i.e. Messiah ben David).

The scenario of the Messiah ben Joseph, as the death of the evil inclination or the cause thereof, is nothing short of a transformation of human nature itself; it can be no surface or superficial kind of change: "it is a total wrenching from one's past, from the dimension of the past in one's being...messianic repentance is a wrenching away from the very nature of man, regardless of whether he has sinned."¹⁶⁵ A total break with the nature of man as it has unfolded through the dimension of history must take place—this is the arena of the Messiah ben Joseph, and the death of the evil inclination.

In the strand of rabbinic thought we have been reflecting upon, we have seen the figure Ephraim as the harbinger of the Messiah, sometimes referred to as the Messiah himself, who must die symbolically as a representation of the sacrifice of the evil inclination which wreaks havoc on the world and prevents the redemption of history (a.k.a. the Messiah ben David). Ephraim is God's precious child, declared his first-born; he becomes connected, in a strand of rabbinic tradition, to a sacrifice of atonement, an agent of reconciliation, the link between the world now and world to come—the movement from the world dominated by

¹⁶³ Urbach, 472.

¹⁶⁴ Laqish states, "O Lord our God...that Thou break and remove the yoke of the Evil Inclination from our heart, since Thou hast created us to do Thy will, and we are duty-bound to do Thy will," quoted in Urbach, 481.

¹⁶⁵ Agus, 215. And it is perhaps no coincidence that Ephraim, in Kabbalistic thought, particularly with commentators such as Radak in the Lurianic school of Kabbalah, associated Ephraim with one who had never sinned in his life. See also Simcha Benyosef, *Living the Kabbalah: A Guide to the Sabbath and Festivals in the Teachings of Rabbi Rafael Moshe Luria* (NY: Continuum, 1999), 101.

the evil inclination to the world of compassion and peace. Whether the death of Ephraim (or the Messiah ben Joseph) is meant to be actual or symbolic, the result is meant to be a psychic transformation, redemption, and deliverance from our own human nature, from our evil inclination. In order for transformation to occur, it seems there still has to be a sacrifice—whether literal or otherwise. And, importantly, the means of offering this sacrifice is through study of the Torah. Torah is both the vehicle and the antidote.

The Sabbath Vaccine

The Torah, as the antidote to mimetic rivalry and the machinations of the yetzer ha-ra, is said to contain 613 commandments. Certainly, however, the Ten Commandments are primary. *I See Satan* opens with a discussion of the Ten Commandments, in fact, to demonstrate that the bedrock of biblical religion is indeed the understanding of mimesis and mimetic rivalry. In *I See Satan*, as discussed in chapter one, Girard looks specifically at commandments six through ten, all of which express prohibitions around different kinds of violence (i.e. stealing, adultery, murder, bearing false witness, and coveting your neighbor's wife). Girard presents a unique interpretation of the commandments in that he sees commandments six through nine as ultimately explained by the tenth commandment. The tenth commandment (prohibiting coveting one's neighbor's wife, etc.), different from the rest, specifically prohibits desire itself. For Girard, the connection is clear: desire is the root of violence, and thus commandments six through nine are really just working up to the ultimate commandment, which is the ground of them all, in the prohibition of desire itself.¹⁶⁶

But what about the first five commandments? Girard leaves these out. In establishing the connection between mimetic desire and the yetzer ha-ra, though, it becomes clear how mimetic desire can be understood as the basis of at least two more (even three) of the commandments: do not practice idolatry

¹⁶⁶ Girard, *I See Satan*, 11.

(Commandments 1 and 2); and remember the Sabbath day—to keep it holy (Commandment 4). The connection of idolatry to mimesis has been addressed above. How is keeping the Sabbath connected?

The purpose of the Sabbath, by no coincidence, is “aimed at freeing man from enslavement to his impulses, and from routine, tension, and the lower spiritual level of the workday.”¹⁶⁷ It is a day commanded for holiness, and for striving to the highest possible level of compassion, joy and communion. The rituals and practices that are commanded for the Sabbath celebration are specifically to help Jews achieve mastery over their evil inclination. The commandment to not “work,” for example, helps to shelter the Jew from the typical daily activities that are routine and create rivalry (there are the physical routines, some of which may be necessary to navigate the world, but there are also the automatic mindsets that accompany these routines.)

The Sabbath is also thought to be metaphysically different; the Sabbath is a time when Jews are endowed with an extra soul (the *shekinah*) that protects them from the yetzer ha-ra, but also fills one with divine-infused freedom. The commandment to keep the Sabbath is then, in one sense, appropriately about humankind’s need to understand the mimetic impulses that are inclined to take over and compel idolatry. The commandment to keep the Sabbath might be, in fact, a direct command to keep mimetic rivalry at bay. With metaphysical aid, Jews are able to practice releasing themselves from mimetic rivalry, from the workings of the yetzer ha-ra, once every week. But the Sabbath is not just a rest from the evil impulse; it is a proactive being with family, community, and the divine – it is a re-orientation while in the world. Rabbi Luria has in this respect called the Sabbath “a taste of the world to come.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Nathan Barack, *A History of the Sabbath* (NY: Jonathan David, 1965), xii.

¹⁶⁸ Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (117-45 BCE), a mishnaic sage, declared that keeping the Sabbath and commandments would also help alleviate the “pangs of the messiah” and is crucial to bringing on the redemption offered by the Messiah ben Joseph. See *Sab.* 118b.

Girardian Implications, Jewish Identity, and the Transformation of Humankind

In light of the Sabbath's purpose to cultivate the higher aspects of humankind, it is certainly appropriate that the Birkhat ha-Banim, the Blessing over Ephraim and Manasseh, is bestowed upon children on this occasion. We have discussed Ephraim's symbolic persona as the Messiah ben Joseph as a break from the past, from the workings of the yetzer ha-ra, and the transformation of human nature in preparation for the Messiah ben David. It appears, in fact, that all the sibling narratives of the book of Genesis are leading up to this point. The narratives develop over the course of the book in a progression that begins with murder (Cain and Abel), moves into forgiveness (Joseph and his brothers), and finally into the peace of no conflict at all (Ephraim and Manasseh). Strikingly, the "wrenching" of human nature that needs to occur, and which is symbolized by Ephraim and Manasseh, may be open to challenge; there may in fact be more of a gradual advancement toward this transformation than is often acknowledged. On the way from Cain and Abel to Ephraim and Manasseh, for example, there is not only the example of Joseph (which has gained a lot of attention from Girard, James G. Williams, and Sandor Goodhart),¹⁶⁹ but other brothers who healed from their initial mimetic conflicts. The scapegoats of the Genesis narratives are, in a sense, "resurrected," and may perhaps serve as models of "the forgiving victim."¹⁷⁰

These "resurrected" figures appear in Genesis and are none other than Ishmael and Esau, who reappear somewhat unexpectedly in the main narrative. In Genesis 25.9-10, for example, Isaac and Ishmael appear together at the grave of their father Abraham. The text of this scene is sparse, but its author seems almost oddly nonplussed at the brothers' appearing together. The reader may be struck by the brothers' presence together, too, especially because of Ishmael's

¹⁶⁹ See especially Girard, *I See Satan*, 118-119; Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*; and Goodhart, "I am Joseph."

¹⁷⁰ A term coined by independent scholar James Alison for a lecture series produced by The Raven Foundation, 2013.

complete silence, and the lack of any type of conversation or drama. The brothers simply co-exist to pay respect to their deceased father. Their reappearance and implied reconciliation may, coincidentally, rest only in the context of their father's death. But Abraham's death was certainly not induced by violence from these brothers.

There is more substance to the story of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 32-33, which recounts Jacob's wrestling with a mysterious divine force—God or an angel (though sometimes translated as “man”)-- in preparation for the meeting. It is generally understood that Jacob undergoes some kind of inner transformation during his wrestling encounter, which enables him to meet successfully with Esau. Jacob is given victory over the angel and is reborn and, in turn, renamed Israel. Jacob, here, has wrestled with God, seen the face of God, and lived.¹⁷¹ Jacob's trepidation around meeting with his estranged brother, however, proves to be unfounded. Esau meets Jacob with open arms, warmth, a kiss, and a genuine joy at their reunion. Esau, in fact, gives the reader much to learn from; as the slighted brother, the “victim”, Esau notably shows up as fully healed, and with the air that forgiveness has fully taken place in his heart. The reader has not been informed about Esau's healing process, but it is clear he has come to terms with the past. He shows genuine love for his brother. Jacob, on the other hand, seems unable to fully relinquish his guilt over the past and his fear of retaliation. But none occurs. James G. Williams delivers an insightful Girardian exegesis of the Jacob and Esau cycle, and makes the astute point that Jacob even returns the blessing he had formerly stolen. Jacob, in this way, undoes what he knew was wrong in order to assuage his own guilt and reconciles himself with his past-- and ironically Esau had already forgiven him. We have here, thus, an exemplary sibling rectification and reconciliation. Jacob and Esau have both, it is sure, wrestled with mimesis itself to get to this place of mutual embrace.

¹⁷¹ For a detailed exposition of the use of the word “face” (Heb., *panim*), and the associations the text makes between the “face” of God and Esau, see Williams, 53.

In light of the examples set by all of these brothers, it is interesting to return to one of Girard's statements cited at the beginning of this chapter. After naming a few rivalries between brothers to illustrate Girard's idea about how sibling conflict seems so pervasive, I noted Girard's succinct statement about brothers: "the theme itself is a form of violence."¹⁷² Is it possible to sustain this argument given the examples here brought forth? While it is clear that this dissertation has taken on the view of sibling rivalry as a lens through which to analyze mimetic rivalry (and one cannot discount that where there are brothers, there is very often violence as we have seen and will see in further chapters), this lens may in effect filter out what possibilities *other than* violence exist when brothers are encountered. I offer the following alternatives: "The theme of brothers itself is an opportunity for progress" is one possibility; or perhaps "the theme of brothers itself is an opportunity for learning"; or, if I might be bold, "the theme of brothers itself is an opportunity for peace."

Ephraim and Manasseh, though, with no conflict at all to speak of, are in an entirely different league from our other sibling pairs. Jacob's blessing of the children at the end of Genesis in and of itself demonstrates a break from the past. Though Jacob is still prophetically pronouncing a greater blessing for Ephraim, both Ephraim and Manasseh are the recipients of the blessing—and this is a dramatic break from previous narratives in which only one child could receive this honor. Jacob himself, in this way, is wrenching us from the violent past (including his own violent past) and creating an alternative that may help to stave off the deep impulse toward rivalry from the start.

Examples of sibling compatibility that occur following Jacob's blessing, in the next book of the Tanakh (i.e., Exodus), may be used to affirm the case of Ephraim and Manasseh as a *vaccine* that can keep mimetic rivalry at bay, and also as a "follow up" to see if our peaceful brothers at the end of Genesis have a lasting influence. Rabbi David Kalb, for example, has pointed to two moments in the Book of Exodus that are acute exemplars of a healthy sibling relationship. The exemplars feature Moses and Aaron, who are the next brothers we meet

¹⁷² Girard, V&S, 61.

upon completion of the Book of Genesis.¹⁷³ Kalb asserts that these examples from Exodus convey to the reader that the problem of sibling rivalry has been resolved, and he asserts this after a well-informed analysis of the rivalry that pervades Genesis, significant for my purposes agreeing with my thesis that Ephraim and Manasseh are symbolic of a transformation.¹⁷⁴

In the first of Kalb's examples, he points to a moment not long before the Exodus from Egypt, when Aaron finds out that his brother Moses is going to be the leader of Israel in spite of the fact that Moses is younger. In Exodus 4.27, Aaron goes to meet his brother as Moses returns to Egypt from Midian:

The Lord said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. Moses told Aaron about all the things that the Lord had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron repeated all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people (Exod. 4.27-30).

This brotherly support and affection displays no sign of jealousy or animosity by Aaron to Moses despite Moses' being cast "as God" or "in the form of the Lord" for his older brother (Exod. 4.16; Num. 12.8). The rabbis also make careful note of Aaron's joy at seeing and kissing his brother, demonstrating sincere happiness over his brother's rise to glory. The *Song of Songs Rabbah* recounts how Aaron is rewarded for his brotherly support:

¹⁷³ There is a long scholarly tradition that questions whether Moses and Aaron were literally brothers, or whether this was a term simply referring to a personal or communal relatedness. Regardless of whether the term is literal or figurative, Moses and Aaron demonstrate how "brothers" can behave in a mimetically positive way.

¹⁷⁴ Kalb discusses several defining moments leading up to the transformation of sibling relationships in Genesis, and further in the Book of Exodus, in one of his Torah commentaries. Interestingly, he states that "family" is not cherished until the nation of Israel becomes enslaved in Egypt. It is the enslavement of the entire Hebrew nation that "teaches the value of family and solves the problem of sibling rivalry." Rabbi David Kalb, personal email to author, January 10, 2011.

Indeed, Aaron was to find his reward, says Simon ben Yoḥai; for that heart which had leaped with joy over his younger brother's rise to glory greater than his was decorated with the Urim and Thummim, which were to "be upon Aaron's heart when he goeth in before the Lord."¹⁷⁵

The reward of *urim* and *thummim* that Aaron receives here is a great honor. These terms can be interpreted in a variety of ways, such as "lights and perfections" or "oracles and commands," even "revelation and truth." No matter how we specifically translate these gifts bestowed upon Aaron, it is clear that control of one's mimetic impulses--- or stated in the affirmative, exemplifying positive mimesis—reaps great divine honor.¹⁷⁶

The rabbis also praise Moses for his brotherly role and laud him for the respect and concern he shows for Aaron. The rabbis point to the call of Moses and interpret Moses' desire for God to send someone else in Exodus 4.13 ("But he said, 'Oh my Lord, please send someone else.'") as Moses' hesitation to accept a position of leadership in place of his brother who had served in such a capacity for so long. Moses is therefore portrayed as respectful of Aaron's feelings and position; he accepts the blessing God grants him (he is really given no choice), but with articulated hesitation. The rabbis highlight the mutuality of the relationship by noting the number of times "Moses and Aaron" are cited together in the Tanakh, singing the praises of their united virtues, even interpreting some of the poetry of the Song of Songs as bringing further attention to such brotherly love and support.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Cant. R. i. 10, in "Aaron," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4-aaron>.

¹⁷⁶ The *Jewish Encyclopedia* cites further rabbinic praise of these brothers, emphasizing the value of both of their respective roles, and their harmony together: "...of them it is written:

"Behold how good and how pleasant [it is] for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. cxxxiii.1). Of them it is said (Ps. lxxxv. 10): "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed [each other]"; for Moses stood for righteousness, according to Deut. xxxiii. 21, and Aaron for peace, according to Mal. ii. 6. Again, mercy was personified in Aaron, according to Deut. xxxiii. 8, and truth in Moses, according to Num. xii.7 (*Tan.*, *Shemot*, ed. Buber, 24-26).

¹⁷⁷ The rabbis draw further attention to the virtue of sibling support in general through citing chapter 8.1 of the Song of Songs: "O that you were like a brother to me/who nursed at my mother's breast!/If I met you outside, I would kiss you/and no one would despise me." Though

The role of both of these leaders is held in high regard, and often with the focus on how they related to one another. In light of several midrashim on Aaron and Moses, we seem to significantly have a second sibling pair that follows the example of Ephraim and Manasseh: two brothers, each with their own blessing, and supportive of one another. Even though their blessings may seem unequal, they are indeed both blessed. The reader is further benefitted here by the narrative examples of how Moses and Aaron have enacted their ongoing positive relationship. This is a benefit that the reader does not have in the case of Ephraim and Manasseh. Aaron and Moses are true “descendants” of Ephraim and Manasseh in their ability to embody “positive mimesis.”¹⁷⁸ Together, they make the statement that the problem of sibling rivalry has been healed; brothers now know how to get along.

Kalb’s second example also features Aaron and Moses stating that their relationship as peaceful brothers is reinforced in the book of Exodus 17.11-12, when the nation of Amalek battles with Israel. He points out that during the battle, as Moses looks on, something very interesting happens. According to the scripture, whenever Moses lifts up his arms, Israel prevails in battle. When he lets his arms down, Amalek prevails in the battle. In the story Moses’ arms, however, become weak and he can no longer hold them up. In response, Aaron and Hur (the son of Miriam and the nephew of Moses and Aaron’s brother-in-law) help to support Moses’ arms so that they can remain raised, and this enables the Jewish people to be victorious over Amalek. Like the earlier example above, when Aaron greets Moses with a kiss, joyful in heart at his brother’s calling, this is one more poignant example of brothers not in rivalry, but working together. Moses and Aaron stand as one, the older the support for the young leader, without a trace of animosity, united to help the Jewish people succeed. What we are seeing in these moments in Moses and Aaron is “the first modeling of shared

one can take these verses as referring to Aaron and Moses specifically, the verses point more generally to the positive affect between siblings—even a longing for a sibling to love.

¹⁷⁸ Please see chapter 5 for a detailed exposition of “positive mimesis.”

leadership in the Torah,” but even more significantly for our purposes, we have acts of positive sibling mimesis.¹⁷⁹

One might say that the precedent for Aaron and Moses’ loving and supportive relationship, and all future “sibling” relationships (where “brother” or “sister” might mean one of the same parents or more generally of the human family),¹⁸⁰ has now been set down at the end of Genesis with the brothers Ephraim and Manasseh. The birthright that future siblings will inherit is the blessing of peace, and every Sabbath one is baptized into this new life and future.

And yet, the force of mimetic rivalry is powerful, even for leaders such as Moses and Aaron. Their ideal relationship is undercut by one instance that is narrated in chapter 12 of the book of Numbers. To set the context for this chapter, one finds the Hebrews in rebellion because they have no meat, and they complain that their time in Egypt was more pleasant. God therefore sends a month’s worth of quails, literally drowning their desire in a plague of game. The rebellion of the Hebrews, however, spreads to Aaron and Miriam, who begin to question whether they are not as worthy as their brother: “They said, ‘Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?’” (Num. 12.2) After they speak as such, God calls the three siblings together, reprimands Aaron and Miriam for aspiring to be as Moses (who “beholds the likeness of the Lord” (Num. 12.8c)), and strikes Miriam with leprosy for seven days.¹⁸¹ Though the biblical text states that only Miriam is punished, it is

¹⁷⁹ Kalb, 2011. Of course one might find this second example of Aaron and Moses’ sibling support bittersweet only in the sense that their rival, the Amalekites, are descendants of Esau. Nonetheless, it is important to separate Esau from his grandson, Amalek, as two separate individuals, especially considering Esau’s former reconciliation with Jacob.

¹⁸⁰ Recalling the earlier footnote on the multiple interpretations of Aaron as Moses’ “brother.”

¹⁸¹ Some conjecture that Aaron is not afflicted because of his priestly duties. See Walter Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 209. Rabbi Abraham Kook (the first Rabbi of pre-state Israel) explains, however, that the Sages seem to agree that Aaron *did* receive some kind of punishment—some believe Aaron, like Miriam, was stricken with leprosy (though for a shorter period of time), or that his punishment was God’s reprimand. See Rabbi Abraham Kook, “Aaron’s Punishment”, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://ravkooktorah.org/BEHAAL61.htm>. Williams contends that Aaron’s punishment was glossed over due to the central importance of these brothers in the wider context of the tradition history of the exodus and covenant. See Williams, 85.

understood by the rabbis that Aaron is guilty and punished as well. Despite Ephraim and Manasseh's vaccine and the strong and positive mimetic relationship we see in Aaron and his brother, this scene shows how easily one can still fall into dangerous rivalry. God's punishing their lapse into jealousy further serves to highlight the importance of positive mimesis as the divinely desired mode for sibling relations.

What we have, therefore, are at least two kinds of sibling examples. Ephraim and Manasseh, and Moses and Aaron, engage in positive mimesis from the start, with only an instance of rivalry cropping up in the case of the latter pair. Ephraim and Manasseh are the vaccine, and Moses and Aaron have been vaccinated. The examples of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau, alternatively, show an initial violence followed by reconciliation. Jacob's example even shows us something of what it takes to engage in the struggle to heal the violent past in one's mental and emotional memory—a necessary healing and a rite of passage, even for the perpetrator of the crime.¹⁸² It seems that all of our brothers, with the exceptions of Abel, Ephraim and Manasseh, go through an implied transformational process. Thus in the end we find siblings together, at least mostly, and perhaps fully healed of past wounds.

In light of these various examples of brothers reunited, or simply peaceful from the start, it seems Genesis both reveals and provides paradigms for controlling and transforming the yetzer ha-ra. The process of its transformation may be tedious (as in the case of Jacob and Esau) or entirely unnecessary (as in Ephraim and Manasseh). Despite this substantial progress Genesis makes towards non-violence, however, the two-Messiah theory does not seem to agree that the yetzer ha-ra can be so easily controlled, less transformed; and the rabbinic tradition that puts forth the two-Messiah trajectory responds to this difficult task with a reversion into the sacrificial. In contrast to the Tanakh that affirms success following the struggle for reconciliation, and expresses faith in humanity's effort and default wholeness, the interpretation of Ephraim as a

¹⁸² Williams interestingly notes that the younger brothers must go through their own experience as victims: Isaac in the binding of Isaac; and Jacob in wrestling with the angel. See Williams, 60.

sacrificial Messiah adds to our Sabbath ritual the notion that transformation is less an attainment of wholeness than an externalizing and killing an unwanted aspect of our humanity. In typical fashion, the plea for redemption regresses into an act of violence – the slaughter of Ephraim, the Messiah ben Joseph, the yetzer ha-ra, and our own human nature. To note, the violence that had previously been formerly been projected outward between sibling pairs is now projected inward; the “victim” is innate, and the scapegoat in the end is that which lies within our selves. In a Girardian sense, we might consider that this habit of relying on violence for reconciliation will continue to create literal, external scapegoats, if we do not first extinguish the problem in ourselves. Tanakh disagrees with this sacrificial mentality, however, and may indicate that every child is blessed and whole, and already transformed.

Girard’s assertion that “the theme itself (i.e. the appearance of brothers) is a form of violence” does not hold water if compared to our biblical passage from Genesis 48. There is simply no violence in the passage. And to reiterate, we have two peaceful brothers who still become absorbed into a strong sacrificial tradition. What else can we make of this?

On one hand, we find in this ritual a strong affirmation of Jewish identity and an incitement to maintain identity-distinction. This is integral as the maintenance of a healthy identity is central to averting mimetic crisis. We return to Jacob and his actions: Jacob blurs distinctions in this narrative of Ephraim and Manasseh that could easily break down into more sibling chaos. Yet, the startling, deliberate and almost humorous way the narrative action unfolds implies that Jacob knows exactly what he is doing:¹⁸³ he is revealing the sacrificial mechanism that he has come to understand. Traditional Jewish interpretation of Jacob’s blessing on Ephraim and Manasseh is of import here. Ephraim and Manasseh are children born to Joseph and his Egyptian wife, and are raised as Jews in the midst of a foreign land. Traditionally, Jews bless their children as Ephraim and Manasseh as an affirmation of Jewish identity in the

¹⁸³ The narrative is startlingly self-conscious, with a twinge of tension and perhaps humor as Joseph tries to correct his father’s deliberately crossed arms. One could imagine Joseph thinking, “Come on dad, not again. Let’s not create a problem.”

midst of exile. Jacob's undoing of each child's given role, and emphasizing a lack of differentiation in those already brothers (and for Girard the embodiments of sacrificial crisis), may also serve as a deeper understanding, and indeed warning against assimilation, which by definition includes a loss of identity. The traditional Jewish interpretation of this ritual, and the past and current Jewish plight in exile, is a warning against ascending to a level of sameness that can only lead to disastrous results. The Sabbath and the Birkhat ha-Banim are thus reminders to maintain distinction, maintain identity, keep the Torah, control the yetzer ha-ra and mimetic impulses that will inevitably lead to rivalry, idolatry, assimilation, and ultimately violence if not contained.¹⁸⁴ The blessing is in this vein also considered the granting of a type of protection upon one's children. The maintenance of distinction is nurtured within the community, passed down through the generations, and supported by peaceful relations.¹⁸⁵

There is a larger, universal meaning that can be gleaned from this Sabbath ritual, too. Its universal meaning is to control mimetic impulses in the context of a humanity that is not in control. Ephraim and Manasseh may be exiles in a foreign land, charged with maintaining an identity against the grain of the culture; but in fact all humans that strive to control their mimetic impulses are in exile—foreigners trying to carve out a space for themselves. Manasseh in particular is charged with this task. It is true that Ephraim is granted more “fame”; he is granted an historical, spiritual and theological purpose. Manasseh, on the other hand, is given a very human task, though I might argue it is even more spiritual than his brother's—he is to withstand receiving the secondary blessing, and as such he must build the ability to transcend his human nature and inclination toward rivalry through intense self-control. Manasseh, in a sense, was required to let go of his desire and surrender to his unique calling. This is the “greater jihad” so to speak—it is to accomplish Manasseh's kind of openness and self-control in the midst of a humanity that is still driven by rivalry,

¹⁸⁴ Compare to Williams discussion of the attainment of differentiation between Jacob and Esau after their reunion in Genesis. Williams, 50-54.

¹⁸⁵ As will be discussed in depth in chapters 5 and 6, it is this identity or boundary maintenance that in fact enables positive mimesis to be realized.

competition and violence. Manasseh embodies exemplary restraint and extraordinary surrender.

The universal meaning found in this text and ritual is also intrinsic to Judaism. Keeping the Sabbath and performing the Birkhat ha-Banim is a phenomenological way to understand how one is to be Jewish—but Judaism also calls for deep reflective practice about our humanity, our drives and impulses, and how to control them and channel them. This is the greater meaning of this narrative of Jacob, Ephraim and Manasseh, which is brought out through a reading of it in the context of Girard's notion of mimetic rivalry.

Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is a passage in the Tanakh that may have been inserted simply in order to justify these two grandchildren as legitimate tribal leaders next to the sons of Jacob. One could also read it rather literally as a prophetic passage foretelling the future greatness of Ephraim. But this narrative is, as I hope I have demonstrated, so much more. This scene and its ritual reverberate from a complex history of sibling rivalry and competition for a blessing. On the surface, perhaps, it seems all is well with Ephraim and Manasseh. And this is the ultimate goal—to be just like these peaceful brothers.

But projected onto this peaceful pair is the steam of a mimetic crisis that habitually demands a sacrifice for reconciliation. In the end, Jews bless their children as Ephraim and Manasseh to break from a violent past of mimetic rivalry and violent expulsion; they aim finally to transcend mimetic impulses, cast off idolatry, act in the transformed freedom of Jacob, and keep the Torah to usher in the Messiah ben David. But instead of remaining within the purview of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which we seem to have a clear and proactive blessing of peace—the rabbinic tradition adds that something must die to attain this positive mimetic quality. As I will demonstrate in the coming chapters, this pull back into the sacrificial mentality is nearly impossible to deny, or even, in many cases, detect. The sacrificial mentality has such a grip on us that we get reenrolled in it even when we believe we are free. This reversion is what the rabbis seem to

have fallen into, perhaps for a multiplicity of reasons.¹⁸⁶ Overlaid upon our sibling pair, thus, is another version of what Girard would call “good” violence, though it is ontologized, theologized, and spiritualized.

After all this, have we really found an antidote to mimetic rivalry and sacrificial violence? Yes and no. While Ephraim and Manasseh are peaceful, they are still brothers whose very presence is to remind us of the real threat of mimetic crisis. We also have Jacob who, though providing a creative and proactive blessing grounded in abundance, still draws our attention to the boys’ unequal gifts. We this have an antidote, but must remain on guard; we must be careful to avoid laying sacrificial interpretations upon a text that contains no violence. This is why, in Jewish tradition, as soon as one finishes reading the Torah, one immediately returns to the beginning and starts to read it again. When one does this, one moves through the narrative arc from violence to peace, from scarcity to abundance, from one singular blessing to multiple blessings. At the end of the arc one discovers all the children are blessed.¹⁸⁷

The same redundancy manifests in the Sabbath and its ritual Birkhat ha-Banim. Jews are commanded to keep the tradition and get the booster shot every week. Like a real vaccine, there is a bit of mimetic desire in the booster, narrative memories of rivalry and violence, just to ensure that one does not catch the disease. But also like a vaccine, this booster is to gradually transform the human system; the process of immunity may be slow, but it is slowly making the systemic changes. Once the systemic changes take hold, one may realize all along that what we really have in this ritual is a peace vaccine. The ritual has nothing of the old order in it; it is fully *of* the new order. The Hebrews of the Tanakh, after all, are about to enter into the next phase of history in the Book of Exodus, in which they will need to unite, free themselves from oppression, and

¹⁸⁶ Mitchell locates the sacrificial theory of the Messiah well within ancient Judaism and significantly pre-dating Christianity, implying a real practical need for help (and possibly hope) in managing the evils of mimetic rivalry within the community.

¹⁸⁷ Further, as I will discuss in greater detail in chapter five, the children are blessed out of a spirit of abundance and freedom—a spirit that in itself wills the unique contribution of each of the children. Free of a past tradition caught up in the meaning of birth orders and birth rights, Jacob manifests true generosity. The way that Jacob blesses proves contagious in its affirmation, and the brothers can literally rest in their wholeness, as all Jews on the Sabbath.

become a nation. In the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow: “Genesis is unable to come to an end until there is a peaceful pair of brothers: Ephraim and Manasseh. Only then can the Bible turn to other problems.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling* (NY: Schocken Books, 1978), 15.

CHAPTER 3

The Second Vaccine:

The Book of Esther and the Holy Day of Purim

Best thing you can do is take the bull's eye off your back. But unfortunately sometimes you find yourself in a situation where the best you can do is shift the bull's eye to someone else.

-John Dyckman¹⁸⁹

The second “vaccine” against mimetic desire is enacted through the Jewish celebration of Purim, which is a holiday mandated in the Book of Esther. The Book of Esther as well as its corresponding holiday is by no means without controversy within the Jewish tradition itself—there have been many scholars throughout the years that have been averse to Purim and to the content of the Book of Esther. There are indeed many grey areas within the book that have put its inclusion in the biblical canon into question. For example, God's name is never mentioned in the book; no copy of Esther has been found at Qumran (implying this book was left out of their corpus on purpose); the violence in the book, even if one views it as necessary self-defense, is exaggerated and horrific; and then there is the problem of the enacted genocide itself. Several rabbis, going as far back as the Talmud, have objected to the book's inclusion in the

¹⁸⁹ John Dyckman, interviewed by Dr. Mike Riera, *Family Talk*, October 31, 2003. Dyckman is also the author of *Scapegoats at Work*. See John Dyckman and Joseph A. Cutler, *Scapegoats at Work: Taking the Bull's Eye Off Your Back* (Westport, CT: Praegar Publishers, 2003).

canon. *Megillah* 7a records some of these objections.¹⁹⁰ The Talmudic rabbis questioned whether the Book was written with proper divine inspiration; and if it “defiles the hands” properly as other sacred books.¹⁹¹ They also raise objections based on the absence of God’s name and explicit providence in the Book, as well as the book’s generally non-Jewish atmosphere. (Though there are a significant number of intra-biblical allusions in the Book of Esther, most agree that the book is, in terms of genre, a Persian romance; and in terms of its corresponding ritual, adaptation of a pagan carnival.) In addition, the Talmudic rabbis expressed concern that the book might raise anti-Jewish sentiment (which, unfortunately, it has on a number of occasions.) Others, finally, claim a lack of admirable characters in the book.

Christians have expressed objections to the book as well: Martin Luther, in one of his table talks, commented on the Book of Esther as follows: “I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they would not have come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.”¹⁹² Sentiment among Christians, in general, has been “historically cool,” seeing no evidence of the book’s influence in the New Testament, nor any relevance for the Church overall.¹⁹³

Most recently, in terms of Jewish response, Professor Aaron Tapper of the University of San Francisco writes,

Although I am aware that some scholars say that the megillah is a brilliantly written farce, the Jewish communities that I have been exposed to in my life have not focused upon this literary

¹⁹⁰ *Talmud Bavli--Mas. Megillah 7a*, accessed December 14, 2011, <http://halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Megilah.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ For a detailed discussion of what the rabbis might mean by “defiles the hands” and how this phrase is relevant to Esther’s canonical status, see Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New IPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xliii-xlv.

¹⁹² William Hazlitt, trans., “Luther’s Table Talk,” *The Lutheran Publication Society*, 2004, accessed December 10, 2011, <http://cat.xula.edu/tpr/works/tabletalk>.

¹⁹³ “Scroll of Esther,” *Jewish Virtual Library and Encyclopedia Judaica*, The Gale Group, 2008, accessed December 9, 2011, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>.

interpretation. Instead, at Jewish day schools, in Jewish summer overnight camps, at synagogue services, and in various yeshivot, I have been invited to cheer and applaud King Ahashverosh's sentencing and hanging of the character Haman, as well as his ten sons, alongside the killing of more than 75,000 others at the hands of Jews.¹⁹⁴

Tapper emphasizes the *mis*interpretation of the book that triggered the ancient rabbis' objections (at least in part) by also calling forth a number of violent acts that Jews have committed against non-Jews on this holiday. Perhaps the most disturbing of these events is when Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 Muslims and injured over 100 others while they were praying in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs. Elliott Horowitz devotes an entire academic enterprise on the Goldstein massacre as well as other examples of violent "revenge" committed by Jews on Purim in his book *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*.¹⁹⁵

The skepticism with which the Book of Esther has been met, in addition to its occasional incitements to violence, compels further investigation into this book's real meaning and purpose. The few objections I mention above are not the only ones that have surfaced. The Book of Esther has been the springboard for innumerable interpretations, rabbinic commentaries, rewrites, plays, and works of art since its inception, (which I put in the time frame of 400-200 BCE following Adele Berlin, as discussed below).¹⁹⁶ I believe that a look at The Book of Esther and its holiday Purim through a Girardian lens in particular, however, will yield one possible answer as to why, ultimately, the Book was included in the canon despite its blatant violence and seeming Godlessness.

My working hypothesis in this regard is that the Book of Esther uses the literary form of what Girard calls a 'persecution text.' The book contains two

¹⁹⁴ Aaron J. Tapper, "Toward a Jewish Theology of Nonviolence", *Tikkun Magazine*, March/April 2005, accessed November 23, 2011, <http://www.tikkun.org>.

¹⁹⁵ Elliot Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁹⁶ Berlin, *Esther*, xli-xliii.

complete persecution texts back-to-back, in fact: the “preface” in which we find the expulsion of Vashti; and the main body of the book in which Haman and other Jew-haters in the kingdom are killed.¹⁹⁷ While these two persecution texts are such in structure, though, they also constitute a breakdown in the mechanism. The first text featuring Vashti represents an intermediary stage—a segway or a bridge, if you will, between the generic “pagan” persecution text told in the voice of the persecutors, and the biblical persecution text, which is told from the voice of the victim. The second persecution text of Esther bursts forth in the voice of the victim, but is notably still enmeshed in the scapegoating narrative structure. It is a possibility that the unfortunate and seemingly unnecessary violence we find at the end of the book is due to the biblical victim emerging victorious, while ironically remaining within the confines of the classic structure of persecution that requires death for reconciliation. The Book of Esther reveals in not so subtle fashion that the mechanism requiring “good” violence is continually operative despite the redemption of the victim, and necessary to open the door to the possibility of true transformation.

Additionally, there are two sub-themes that I will touch upon through this analysis. First, the literary form in itself is mimetic. The scenes in the Book of Esther, when broken down, display a clear tit-for-tat—each scene repeated twice, the second time in reverse. In this way, the literary form mirrors the rivalry of the characters it is presenting. Second, the literary form of the book mirrors the Jews' actual historical situation in exile. The Jews are forced in narrative as well as in history to live within the confines of a culture that is other than their own, and also within the confines of a violent mechanism, whether the Jews turn out to be the scapegoats themselves or not. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is a kind of spiritual exile, too. Those who aim to keep the yetzer ha-ra in check (Jews and otherwise) necessarily find themselves in a world in which mimetic rivalry and the evil impulse run rampant.

¹⁹⁷ I discuss a third persecution text below that occurs between the other two, that is, the eunuch's plot against the king, but it is not complete according to Girard's structure, as I will discuss later on.

The Book of Esther is therefore a book full of ironic juxtapositions: it is about how to be oneself within the confines of otherness; it is about the victory of the victim within a mimetic structure that feeds on victims. One may encounter the book's continued relevance today as the voice of the victim is still emerging out of (and is often still submerged within) a structure of violence. My hope is that bringing Girard to bear upon the Book of Esther will show one more way the Jews were trying to expose mimetic rivalry and the victim mechanism. I hope this interpretation will also serve to resolve some of the aforementioned issues that have brought Esther and Purim negative press.¹⁹⁸

I will do three things henceforth in this chapter. First, I will bring the Book of Esther and its various incarnations into focus. What I will show through this exposition is how the earliest communities were troubled by this book and sought to "correct" it. Second, I will provide an overview of Girard's "persecution text" and demonstrate how the Book of Esther conforms to yet breaks away from its pattern. Third, I will turn my attention to select rituals enacted on Purim—rituals that function as vaccines against the mimetic violence of the world in which the Jews find themselves, literally and literarily, trapped. As a subtheme throughout, I will bring forth the rabbinic commentary on Esther and Purim to see how the midrashim add interpretive layers to the text we have in the Tanakh, and what these layers convey.

The Redaction History of the Book of Esther

It seems the only place to begin an interpretation of the Book of Esther, is to first give a brief summary of its interpretive history. One gets the sense of the

¹⁹⁸ For example, this interpretation allows one to interpret the violence at the end of the book as a reflection of the prevailing cultural mechanism at work. The violence is neither an expression of the "bloodthirsty" Jews, nor excusable as self-defense. The violence is the scapegoating mechanism at work, requiring blood for reconciliation. The Jews are indeed trapped within this structure in exile. The Book of Esther makes this structure crystal clear while it presents a case for its transformation.

controversial nature of this book from its very inception. So it seems important to give an idea of its redaction history, which will, in turn, give a glimpse inside what the authors (and possibly their respective communities of faith) were concerned with in the time periods subsequent to its inception.

To begin, the typical time frame in which the MT (Masoretic Text) Book of Esther was written is 400-200 BCE.¹⁹⁹ Berlin places the book into the latter half of this window, 300-200 BCE, indicating a late biblical and early postbiblical authorship. This is also the late Persian/early Greek period. Berlin attributes MT Esther to this period for logical reasons: 1) linguistic comparison to contemporaneous biblical books such as Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles; 2) genre of the book as a farce about the Persian court (which would make sense only if the Persian court were still in power); 3) an assumed political setting in which the Jews are ultimately safe, suggesting a time before the Maccabean revolt (167 BCE); and 4) the similarities between Esther and the early Greek writings on the Persian court (which came about in 400-300 BCE).²⁰⁰

Further, Berlin classifies Esther as a Jewish Diaspora story, similar to the Book of Daniel, and the apocryphal books of Judith and Tobit. She states:

All of these books are entertaining fictional narratives that present models of successful behavior for Jews living in the Diaspora. They are designed to promote pride in Jewish identity and solidarity within the Jewish community and with Jewish tradition. They reflect a situation in which Jews were a minority in a larger society and where it fell to the individual Jew, not the state, to ensure Jewish continuity.²⁰¹

The primary difference between MT Esther and the other Diaspora stories is Esther's lack of religiosity. In MT Esther, there is neither mention of God, nor

¹⁹⁹ Berlin, xliii.

²⁰⁰ For her complete arguments see Berlin, xli-xliii.

²⁰¹ Ibid., xxxiv.

adherence to ritual.²⁰² The “secular” nature of Esther has been an obvious issue as evidenced by the rewrites and commentaries to which we now turn.

There is a long list of translations, versions, rewrites and commentaries (*midrashim*). These versions of the Book of Esther are quite varied, some of them receiving canonical status within different biblical traditions. The Septuagint Book of Esther (LXX), for example, contains a number of additions—some are more matters of translation-- but there are also entire narrative passages that alter the nature of the book and add elements that put it more in line with other biblical texts. The Book of Esther is also the only entire biblical text to be included in the Bavli. The number of versions written and amount of attention this book received so early on in its history is significant. A brief look at a few of the versions we have will highlight not only the problem of Esther’s secularity, but the other kinds of issues that were at stake.

There are a few versions of Esther that were written before the Common Era. First, there is the MT version of Esther, which is part of the Hebrew canon. As stated above, I will agree with Berlin that the MT Esther was written about 400-200 BCE. There are also two Greek versions of Esther written around 0: the Septuagint version (LXX) (known as the B-Text or BT); and the A-Text (AT), which is shorter than the LXX, and contains material from the MT and LXX, but also passages that are quite different from them both.²⁰³

Matthew Fox, in *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, and more substantially in his monograph *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (1990), advocates for the idea that there was also a discernable “Proto-AT,” which accounts for the anomalous passages found only in the AT version, and which was written before the MT.²⁰⁴ He adds that the Proto-AT was likely derived from

²⁰² Ibid., xxxiv, xli. Berlin adds that the theme of the “wise courtier” and Esther’s allusions to other biblical books further classifies it as a Diaspora story.

²⁰³ Berlin notes that the AT is also sometimes referred to as the “Lucianic recension”, or just “L”. See Berlin, xlix.

²⁰⁴ Matthew Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1990).

a Proto-Esther, from which the MT was also derived. Some scholars advocate that Proto-Esther contained religious elements that the MT author removed; others that it did not. Even if Proto-Esther is beyond reach, Fox has put together an approximation of Proto-AT that seems legitimate, and which brings a very interesting perspective to what we currently have in both the MT and later versions.

According to Fox, Proto-AT is missing the following elements of the MT: 1) the assumption of the inalterability of Persian law; 2) the expansion of the battle reports; 3) the second day of fighting and celebration; 4) the Purim etiology; and 5) the epilogue in 10:1-3. In addition, Proto-AT contains a few references to God (though it does not come across as very religious), and presents Esther as less clever and slightly fearful. What is most striking, however, is not its character portraits nor mild religiosity, but its simplistic “happily ever after” ending:

And the king summoned Mordecai, and he bestowed on him all that was Haman's. And he said to him, “What do you want—I shall do it for you.” And Mordecai said, “That you annul the letter of Haman.” And the king put into his hands the affairs of the kingdom (viii 15-17).

And a decree concerning these matters was issued in Susa, and the king empowered Mordecai to write whatever he wished. And Mordecai sent words via letters, which he had sealed with the king's ring, to the effect that his people should remain each in his own place and hold celebration unto God. And the epistle that Mordecai sent contained the following: “Haman sent you letters saying thus: ‘Make haste swiftly to send the disobedient Jewish people to destruction for me.’ But I Mordecai inform you that the one who did these things has been hanged before the gates of Susa and his household has been executed, for he sought to kill us on the thirteenth day of the month, which is Adar (viii 33-38).

Proto-AT, as Fox describes it, is “a salvation tale: two Jews clash with a wicked enemy and defeat him.”²⁰⁵ In Proto-AT, Fox continues:

The power of the state is essentially reliable. Though it may be deflected by its proper course by lies and deceit, the state possesses the mechanisms to correct itself. The practical problem is how to reach the king, the guarantor of stability who stands at the source of power...The Jewish people, other than the protagonists, are spectators to the working-out of their fate.²⁰⁶

Proto-AT avoids the problem of the MT when Haman’s decree cannot be revoked because of irreversible Persian law. Proto-AT thus avoids many difficulties of the MT, which necessitates full-blown war, in favor of a centralized, simplistic ending, with minimal violence that is done unto Haman and his family alone.²⁰⁷ One might argue that Proto-AT loses some dramatic power in its effortless undoing of Haman’s decree. It would have nonetheless gotten most of the more traditional points of the text across in a seemingly “safer” fashion.²⁰⁸

The LXX (and here I refer to the B-text) in general is a basic translation of the MT text, remaining essentially true to its source. The real difference between the MT and the LXX are the additions. There are 6 additions to the MT that the LXX adds:

²⁰⁵ Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 261.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 262.

²⁰⁷ In analyzing Proto-AT further, one might also come to the conclusion that one does not get the opportunity to assess the degree to which there are “haters” of Jews not only inside the court (e.g. Haman), but outside the court. Without the fighting at the end, those who would in fact attack the Jews would remain “hidden.” Both Jews and anti-Jews are thus revealed by the MT version in a metaphorical apocalypse: Esther’s previously concealed Jewish identity is revealed in battle; and the identities of the anti-Jews are as well. This apocalyptic interpretation of Esther has its home in the later mystical schools of Judaism.

²⁰⁸ E.g., reversals, security in exile, appropriate behaviors for success in the Diaspora, God’s providence and salvation for the people of Israel, etc.

- Addition A: beginning of the story: dream of Mordecai foreshadowing destruction (two great dragons), and Mordecai's discovery of the plot against the king.
- Addition B: follows 3:13: wording of the edict against the Jews
- Addition C: follows 4:17: the prayer of Mordecai and prayer of Esther asking for deliverance
- Addition D: follows Addition C: an account of Esther's appearance before the king
- Addition E: follows 8:12: gives the contents of edict on behalf of the Jews
- Addition F: end of story after 10:3: an interpretation of Mordecai's dream in relation to story.²⁰⁹

The LXX additions insert religious elements, prophetic dream, prayer, and God's name. All of these elements bring Esther in closer narrative relationship with other books of the period such as Daniel and Ezra/Nehemiah, though the addition also lend a different character to the primary players in the book, in particular Esther, Ahasuerus and Mordecai. The LXX additions reflect its redactor's context of Hellenism as well. In the Hellenistic context, religion replaces ethnicity; religious elements are thus brought into Esther and emphasized.²¹⁰

Most important for our purposes is the change that occurs by bringing in prophetic dreams, in which "two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation."²¹¹ The dreams foretell the events that will happen through the book, making the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, and the Jews and Persians in turn, the unfolding of the divine plan, changing the Book of

²⁰⁹ Berlin, 1.

²¹⁰ R. Frye, quoted in Berlin, I.

²¹¹ Harrelson, *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1403.

Esther “from a court novella into an apocalyptic drama pitting Israel against the nations.”²¹² The *NISB* interprets Addition A, stating:

The upheaval of the natural world signals God’s absence and the breakdown of the social order...Although usually dragons symbolize nations, here they symbolize two individuals, one of whom is Mordecai. This personal conflict causes the nations to prepare to fight the righteous nation Israel.²¹³

Though the actions of humans unfold the drama, they are somehow put into a predetermined divine context, alleviating humans from some of the responsibility.

Moving into the first few centuries of the common era, there is a “third” Greek account (the other two being the LXX and AT) written by Josephus in his book *The Antiquities of the Jews*, (Book II, chapter 6); and numerous midrashic collections, including a midrashic exposition of the entire book of Esther in *B. Megillah* 10b-17a of the Bavli.²¹⁴

Josephus’ paraphrase of the book was written in the first century CE. Josephus, like the early rabbis, was well aware of the anti-Jewish sentiment that could emerge in response to Esther, and made certain emendations to combat anti-Jewish stereotypes. Josephus, for example, tried to make Jewish values align with Greco-Roman values. Josephus also makes the strong point that Haman was an Amalekite (a term not used in MT or LXX) so that he can attribute Haman’s hatred to a family feud and personal grudge rather than to Jews’ misanthropy, distinctiveness or eternal Jewish-Gentile conflict. Josephus also demonstrated a concern for law and order: for example, Mordecai could not bow down to Haman because the laws of his own people forbade it. The Persian

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ The midrashic collections are: *Esther Rabbah*; *Abba Gorion*; *Panim Aherim* (two versions); *Leqah tov*; *Midrash Meggillat Esther*; *Aggadat Esther*; *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapters 49-50; *Yalkut Shimoni*; *Midrash Shoher Tov* (midrash on two psalms – Esther interpretation in part on psalm 22); and *Seder Olam Rabbah* (chapter 29 on Esther).

legal system is also represented more seriously, and less in terms of the parody of the MT.²¹⁵

The Babylonian Esther Midrash was composed in the time frame of the third to fifth century CE, and is a uniquely rich source of information, unique also in the sense that it is the only midrash in the Talmud of an entire biblical book. This Babylonian midrash, according to Eliezer Segal, (who has completed the most extensive study of it), was originally a homiletical collection on the biblical book perhaps begun in Palestine, but which became adopted into the curriculum of the Babylonian yeshiva thus assuming characteristics of the yeshiva-driven exegetical tradition.²¹⁶ The details of his analysis can be read in his three volume critical commentary, but will not hold us up here. The import of Segal's interpretation of the Bavli Esther here is that it gives us a glimpse of how the content of Esther was being used for sermons and expositions of Jewish ideas and values, and also how the rabbis, after some time had passed, came to interpret the biblical story. The themes that I will draw out of the Bavli Esther concern: Mordecai's ancestry as a Benjaminite and as the final link in an ancient struggle between Israel and Amalek; the variety of reasons the rabbis filled in as to why Haman held such a personal grudge against Mordecai; the uncertain moral character of Ahasuerus; and the link to the biblical antagonist, the Babylonians, through Vashti, whom the midrash identifies as a descendent of Nebuchadnezzar.²¹⁷

The account here already demonstrates how the Book of Esther has gripped the imagination of Jews and others from the biblical era, and this is just a very scant list of interpretations and rewrites that exist. We have many strains of interpretation that focus on the piety of Esther and the religiosity of the text in general, inserting God in to the picture at various points, and seeing God

²¹⁵ Berlin, lii.

²¹⁶ Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary*, vol. 1 (GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 11-12.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 258. The Palestinian (or Yerushalmi) Talmud, also composed in the general time period of the Bavli, follows the more common thread of linking the rivalry of the Jews to Haman and the Amalekites (hearkening all the way back to Esau.)

providentially in the background where not explicitly mentioned. For our paper, however, what must simply now be noted are the strains of interpretation that assign multiple seats of blame, outlining various rivalries, each representing an ancient, almost mythical struggle. Sticking to the MT (as this is the text of the Hebrews and the one to which the rabbinic commentators adhered), it is now time to look more deeply into the MT text of Esther, its characters, and the struggles of which they speak.

The Preface to the Book of Esther as Persecution Text: Vashti as the 'Pagan' Scapegoat

One might say that the preface to the Book of Esther is unnecessary to the rest of the book. The book, admittedly, *could* be read in its absence; the effect of the surprising reversals and Jews' victory would not be diminished. So, one must ask the very same question as King Ahasuerus: "What ought to be done with Queen Vashti?" (Est. 1:15) But if we are to say that no word has made it into the Bible by accident, then the presence of this preface must serve some purpose. Jacques Derrida wrote in an essay on Hegel:

Prefaces, along with forwards, introductions, preludes, preliminaries, preambles, prologues, and prolegomena, have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement...this subtraction leaves a mark of erasure, a remainder which is added to the subsequent text and which cannot be completely summed up within it.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, quoted in Timothy K. Beal, *Book of Hiding : Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London, England; New York: Routledge, 1997), 29.

According to Derrida, even if the purpose of the preface is not explicit, it creates a context inside of which the rest of the book is read. Its erasure, its being left behind in itself, leaves us with an absence that resonates. What is it exactly, then, that is being left behind in the Book of Esther? It is my assertion that this preface about Vashti is a presentation of what Girard calls a “persecution text.” In this section I will demonstrate that the preface to Esther reveals a mimetic crisis, and utilizes the scapegoat mechanism (in which Vashti is the scapegoat) to reconcile the community in distress. While it is in most aspects a classic text of persecution, however, I will also demonstrate that it provides a critique of the mechanism, opening the door to a new perspective on victimage later in the narrative.

Persecution texts, in general, present three fundamental moments for Girard:

(1) dissolution in conflict, removal of the differences and hierarchies which constitute the community in its wholeness [in which the dissolution is due to mimesis, *my addition*]; (2) the *all against one* of collective violence; and (3) the development of interdictions and rituals.²¹⁹

Each of these ideas was parsed out in the first chapter of this dissertation, but deserve a brief overview here.

The first aspect is, as stated, the dissolution in conflict, or simply the “crisis.” There may be varied types of external causes for a crisis such as natural disasters, plague, etc.; or there may be internal causes such as political uproar or religious dissention. Regardless of the seeming cause, however, the real crisis, according to Girard, is in the dissolution of social differences caused by intense mimetic rivalry—“mimetic doubling” as Girard calls it, which is mimetic rivalry to the point where mimetic opponents are mirrors of each other, the object of desire

²¹⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 141-142.

being lost to the opponents' focus on the rivalry itself. In this atmosphere, there is an unsettling feeling of sameness; there is a breakdown in the known order of things, creating a kind of shock, leading to feelings of confusion and overwhelming alarm. Whatever kind of crisis at hand, "the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and 'differences' that define cultural divisions."²²⁰ The 'crimes' committed by those who are persecuted are fundamental, and are such that "they attack the very foundation of cultural order, the family and the hierarchical differences without which there would be no social order."²²¹

The second aspect of the persecution text is the "all against one" of collective violence, meaning the community in crisis begins to restore unanimity through finding a victim to blame for the crisis. Those who are chosen as scapegoats tend to share certain characteristics. They tend to be marginal figures that somehow have one foot in, one foot out of mainstream society. Those who are most often persecuted thus fit into certain categories such as king or other symbols of authority, or on the opposite end of the spectrum the young or weak. In essence, the scapegoat must be one who, in some sense, has certain shared characteristics with the dominant group, but who also possesses a social vulnerability.

The accusations that fall upon the scapegoat also tend to fall into certain categories—the crimes typically being either sexual or religious in nature. A scapegoat, for example, may be accused of incest or bestiality; or otherwise idolatry or profaning the sacred. Girard states that these "crimes" may be simple misunderstandings. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard defines the victim as "a person who comes from elsewhere, a well-known stranger. He is invited to a feast which ends with his lynching. Why? He has done something which he should not have done; his behavior is perceived as fatal; one of his gestures was

²²⁰ René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 12.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

misinterpreted.”²²² Perhaps the stranger was only acting according to his or her own customs. But the “smallest misunderstanding can be disastrous.”²²³

To explain why a gesture or action that may have been innocent could be so vastly misconstrued, Girard emphasizes the irrational exaggeration with which the accuser(s) analyzes the action of the one blamed: “Instead of seeing the microcosm as reflection of imitation of the global level, it seeks in the individual the origin and cause of all that is harmful.”²²⁴ One informed by reason might look to context (familial, cultural, etc.—that is, the macrocosm) in order to understand the cause of an individual’s behavior (and thereby “understand” or display “empathy” for the stranger). The persecutor of whom Girard speaks, contrarily, finds crisis concentrated in the individual and projects it onto the world, seeing in this individual (or group) the collapse of the whole. The persecutor is thus prone to a gross and dangerous tendency for stereotyping and paranoia. The fear conjured by the persecutor is then contagious, leading to mimetic snowballing in which a collective unanimously unites against a victim.

The third characteristic of the classic persecution text is the development of an interdiction or ritual. In the classic arc of the persecution text, the scapegoat creates a reunified community and is at once blamed for the crisis and, at the same time, glorified for restoring peace. Communities will thus: 1) create a prohibition or taboo in order to prevent the threat of chaos from returning; and/or 2) ritualize the expulsion of the scapegoat to recreate reconciliation even in times when it may not entirely needed.

The preface to Esther presents all three of these persecution text characteristics and, in my estimation, deliberately presents the reader with a scapegoat narrative in order to reveal the mechanism. A parsing of what I am calling the “preface”, i.e. chapter 1 of the Book of Esther, will demonstrate how this gets accomplished.

²²² Ibid., 32.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 21.

The Book of Esther begins as a folktale, “It happened in the days of Ahasuerus...”²²⁵ and proceeds to describe in great detail the setting in which we are placed: it tells of the expanse of the king’s territories “from India to Ethiopia”, and the expanse of his wealth and majesty through his over 180 days of hospitality followed by a seven-day banquet with “couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble...And there was royal wine in abundance as befits a king. And the rule for the drinking was, ‘No restrictions!’” The opening scene presents the reader with an image of gross excess and exaggeration, qualities that also apply to the mental state of the king and his courtiers, as we find out next.²²⁶

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcass, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and the fire burned within him. (Esther 1:10-12)

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure...”What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?”

Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen’s behavior will make wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty’s officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation! (1:16-18)

²²⁵ All biblical passages in this chapter will be quoted from the Masoretic Text in translation from the Jewish Publication Society.

²²⁶ The historical details lend an air of authenticity, however, giving an eerie ‘truer-than-true’ quality to the story.

The king takes Memucan's subsequent advice, expels Vashti from the kingdom, and sends to "all the provinces" what could only be interpreted as a ludicrous edict: "all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike" (Est. 1:20b).

What we have here, in this opening scene, is indeed comic. That the king needs to lay down a law for husbands to respect their wives only points to his own weakness and inability to be "king of his own castle." (And yet he has far-spread lands to rule!) It is funny, and also pitiable.²²⁷ But despite the joke, there is a very serious dynamic of persecution at play here.

The scene illustrates the three stages of Girard's standard persecution text cited above. To reiterate the description of what happens in the first stage of a persecution text: "the strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and 'differences' that define cultural divisions."²²⁸ The biblical text is quite sparse throughout the Book of Esther, and also here in what I call its "preface." Nonetheless, the author gives us just enough information to deduce that there is a likely power struggle between these two powerful monarchs. For example, the text tells us that while Ahasuerus holds a banquet, Vashti holds her own banquet for the women. It is further stated in the text that Vashti holds her banquet in "the royal palace of King Ahasuerus" (Est. 1:9). The Bavli rabbis certainly imagined a rivalry between the two monarchs. In the Bavli, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana notes that, "Vashti made the party in the king's palace rather than in the women's quarters, or harem, and this suggests that both Vashti and Ahasuerus had immoral intentions."²²⁹ Other rabbinic midrashim and aggadot about Vashti do not portray her in such negative terms, but they equally illustrate the power struggle.²³⁰ In most midrashim and

²²⁷ A reader of this text need not be entirely unsympathetic to the king and his public embarrassment. The biblical author ensures the reader retains at least some distance from the king, however, by emphasizing the king's indecisiveness and long-term drunkenness (a point I will discuss below.)

²²⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 12.

²²⁹ *B. Megillah 12a*, quoted in Berlin, 13.

²³⁰ For example, see Eliezer Segal, *Holidays, History, and Halakhah* (NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2000), 124-126.

aggadot, the rabbis depict Vashti as strong and of royal origin; Ahasuerus, contrarily, is often depicted as of lowly origin, raised to royal status only by virtue of his marriage to Vashti. A competition for status and rank is the imagined struggle between these two characters, and that this is the core issue that is playing out during the banquet. One might infer that the biblical author intended this, too—that the author intentionally set up a case of mirroring between these two characters through their parallel feasts, though the biblical text conveys no certainty.

Following the rabbis' trajectory, the violent context of mimetic rivalry for status and authority provides the emotional charge for an exaggerated reaction based on a fear of social "similarity" – a lack of control over social roles, and ultimately, social chaos, setting the stage for the scapegoat mechanism to play out (the *all against one* of collective violence, which is the second aspect of Girard's persecution text). The breakdown of social distinctions is acutely felt by the king and those in his company: the private/public role of husband/king has been opened up to criticism by Vashti's refusal—the male authority rebelled against and overruled, their respective social roles collapsing into a struggle of wills played out by mimetic doubles. The king and his advisors thus interpret Vashti's act of refusal as quite dangerous; they see it as an imminent threat, creating a state of crisis, and requiring an immediate response.²³¹ According to Girard, the persecutors within the persecution text commonly form this type of exaggerated response.

²³¹ This Girardian interpretation does not preclude that there may be other possible reasons for Memucan wanting to depose Vashti (a topic on which some rabbinic commentators have elaborated.) But the *actual* reason for Memucan's suggestion of expulsion is irrelevant to this structural analysis. What is of import is the expressed feeling of social distress and chaos as the result of her act, to confirm the first stage of persecution according to Girard. Likewise, the *actual* reason for Vashti's refusal has no bearing on the progression of the story—a mimetic crisis is created in the minds of those at the king's banquet regardless of any reason that may or may not have been given.

Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator. It bridges the gap between the insignificance of the individual and the enormity of the social body. If the wrongdoers, even the diabolical ones, are to succeed in destroying the community's distinctions, they must either attack the community directly, by striking at its heart or head, or else they must begin the destruction of difference within their own sphere by committing contagious crimes such as parricide and incest.²³²

While we do not have literal parricide or incest in relation to Vashti and Ahasuerus, there is a destruction of male authority—a symbolic parricide, if you will. The impetus for the crisis is precisely the threat of chaos if social identities such as husband/wife, king/queen, man/woman, collapse.

The drunkenness of the king (and likely of his advisors as well) is the narrative's way of indicating that what we also have at work is an irrational and exaggerating mentality—precisely the kind of mentality that creates a “crisis” out of what is perceived as a threat, or perhaps as Girard suggests above, a “mere misunderstanding.” Vashti has become a popular subject for modern feminist commentators who suggest, for example, that her refusal may have been an act to preserve her dignity. There is no attempt to understand Vashti in the biblical narrative, though; her refusal signifies, for the king and his advisors, absolute chaos in the midst of an otherwise “orderly” kingdom. The sense of order in the kingdom is reflected in the narrative: everything from the couches of gold and silver to the seven eunuchs attending the king seems orchestrated, deliberate, and in its place. Except Vashti. Vashti's guilt or innocence is not debated here, nor is it even relevant. Reparation, within the schema of a persecution text, will not require justice per se, but rather a re-establishment of difference. Grave action must be taken to ensure the hierarchical structure of the kingdom, and Vashti is the cause of the chaos. All for the sake of order and social distinctions

²³² Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 15.

therefore unite illustrating the second mark of the persecution text: the all against one. All agree Vashti must be expelled, and she is.

The third characteristic of the persecution text is in the creation of a prohibition, law or ritual, which we also have in this preface to Esther. Girard makes a striking statement about the myth of the founding of Rome, which elucidates the irrationality, yet seeming necessity, of the expulsion of Vashti and the king's subsequent edict to husbands and wives. Girard says:

Remus did not respect the ideal limit traced by Romulus between the inside and the outside of the city. The motive for the killing is at once insignificant—since the city does not yet exist—and crucial, literally fundamental. In order for the city to exist, no one can be allowed to flout with impunity the rules it prescribes. So Romulus is justified. His status is that of sacrificer and High Priest; he incarnates Roman power under all its forms at one and the same time. The legislative, the judiciary, and the military forms cannot yet be distinguished from the religious; everything is already present within the last.²³³

The juxtaposition that I find so striking in here is “since the city does not yet exist” with “in order for the city to exist.” Whether we have in Esther a comical edict or not, the mechanism beneath its surface is serious: a rule for order between husbands and wives is literally “founded” by Ahasuerus upon an act of violence. Further, the violence is seen as justified (though illogical) in that Vashti transgressed a law that had yet to be established. Her transgression creates the law much in the same way Remus’ did, and in a way also reminiscent of Cain. The Persian law on marital relations (as a microcosm of the larger order of things) may indeed be said to have a violent origin.

Interpreting this scene *structurally*, then, and according to Girard's delineation, this preface follows the pattern of the persecution myths: there is a mimetic crisis in the kingdom; Vashti is perceived as the inciter of the chaos and

²³³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 146-7.

becomes the scapegoat; her expulsion reinstates and newly defines the order. In this opening to the book of Esther, we thus immediately find the “three great moments” of persecution myths Girard defines.²³⁴

Yet there is a difference between this biblical narrative and its corresponding pagan texts. The typical text of persecution, according to Girard, would be written from the point of view of the persecutor, and would present the victim as indisputably guilty of the crime of which they are accused. In the preface to Esther, the line between persecutor and victim is not so clear. In Esther, the author seems more intent on making the king appear weak and drunk than on commenting on Vashti’s motives, guilt or innocence. The very “disorder” Ahasuerus’ advisors say will be caused by Vashti is, for example, discussed by the king and his advisors who, as aforementioned, have been drunk for seven days. The comedy in which the tale is told makes the mimetic mechanism even more pronounced: if we take the side of the persecutors, we are excessive, drunk and paranoid, too (not to mention a persecutor!) We might be able to see the king and his advisor’s point: we might also want a way of retaining order; societies depend on it. At the same time, the biblical author keeps us at a distance from the king. We cannot side with him. So what *should* be done about Vashti? With whom does the reader identify?

Taking the side of Vashti, the “victim” in this opening narrative, presents its problems, too. Girard speaks of how the biblical narratives begin to unravel the scapegoat mechanism through their clearly discernable defense of the innocence of the victim and condemnation of the murder: “...even if Cain is invested with what are basically the same powers, and even if he has the ear of the deity, he is nonetheless presented as a vulgar murderer...The condemnation of the murder takes precedence over all other considerations.”²³⁵ But do we have in the text what we could call a clear condemnation of Vashti’s expulsion? Max Weber adds to Girard’s insights when he asserts that the Jews, having experienced so

²³⁴ Ibid., 141-2.

²³⁵ Ibid., 147.

many catastrophies through history, and having had little historical success compared to the cultures around them that had formed empires (e.g. Persians, Babylonians, Romans, etc.), have a definitive prejudice in favor of victims. They “spring to the victim’s defense” and have an “undeniable tendency to take the side of the victim on moral grounds.”²³⁶ To the modern reader, Vashti seems the undeniable victim (proven by the many feminist commentaries written in her defense.) But in the narrative, she is neither known to be innocent nor redeemed. She falls away almost forgotten. This seems decidedly unbiblical, and so we must inquire more deeply.

The Talmud presents a mostly consistent picture that affirms Vashti’s guilt and elaborates a degrading end for her.

The vilification of Vashti, while it finds no apparent justification in the details of the biblical account, should not surprise us as a midrashic motif...we have noted on several occasions how her fate was identified with that of her ancestors Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. From a midrashic perspective, the very fact that she is punished at the conclusion of the episode provides evidence that she was a sinner.²³⁷

Vashti, for the Talmudic rabbis, is associated with Babylon (those responsible for the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jews), and would not have been viewed as a victim by most Jews of the era, no matter what her fate.²³⁸ The rabbis elaborate further that Vashti was not only sent away (as the biblical tale ambiguously states), but was “slaughtered naked on the Sabbath” adding insult to injury.²³⁹

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Segal, v.1, 252-3

²³⁸ In one sense, this biblical book sets Vashti up against Esther as a typological rivalry between Babylon and Israel for the king (God.) But this is not a line of interpretation we will follow here.

²³⁹ *Talmud Bavli*, quoted in Segal, v.1, 255.

Though the rabbis advocate for Vashti's guilt and just expulsion, we do not know Vashti's guilt from the scriptures. I assert that the biblical text, rather than implying Vashti's guilt and just end, in fact opens up the question of her having been wrongfully expelled. Chapter 2 of the Book of Esther states: "Some time afterward, when the anger of King Ahasuerus subsided, he thought of Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her" (2:1). The rabbinic view of this verse is absolute: "As she had done, so it was decreed against her."²⁴⁰ The rabbis' interpretation asserts with confidence that Ahasuerus displayed no ambivalence in this verse; he was satisfied with what had passed in a "measure for measure" kind of way. The biblical text, however, gives no definitive indication of this. The biblical text itself may in fact present an Ahasuerus that had sobered up and realized the full import of what had occurred. His servants, in an attempt to relieve the king of his regret, rush to find him virgins. Perhaps the king missed his wife and regretted the decision he had made.²⁴¹ Perhaps Ahasuerus, in this passage, almost "hears" the voice of the victim. But the biblical narrator is not ready to unfold redemption for the Babylonian "victim." The narrator lets Ahasuerus be distracted. He lets the so-called victim's voice be drowned out by the voices of new women, to begin a new mimetic cycle.

This is the place we must make a preliminary and Girardian character analysis of the king. Girard makes an in depth analysis of the beheading of John the Baptist, which was not to be written until perhaps 400 years after Esther. Still, Girard's analysis of this reinterpretation of the Esther narrative (if I may call it that) is very helpful to understand the king's mimetic character, and why although he almost hears the voice of the victim, it remains concealed.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ *Talmud Bavli*, quoted in Segal, v.1, 255.

²⁴¹ Segal, v. 1, 275 (footnote 131). Some Talmudic sources in fact agree with this interpretation. The Yerushalmi has Ahasuerus, who regrets his decision about Vashti, send the seven advisors to their death. This difference in interpretation is contextual. The Yerushalmi and Bavli tend to demonize their respective geographic and historical enemies, polarizing Israel and the "Other" in their exegesis.

²⁴² Girard states:

First, it seems quite obvious that Ahasuerus desires, perhaps above all else, an orderly kingdom. We have already seen in the case of Vashti, how a threat to order is met with violence. But it is not Ahasuerus alone who decides these fates. Ahasuerus is more like a blank slate; he is the “coming into being” of the desires of those who happen to be around him. In other words, Ahasuerus takes on the desires of those around him; he is a purely mimetic creature.

Girard might liken Ahasuerus to a child who by nature lacks in being, and who takes on the desires in imitation of the caregiver(s). This is precisely what Ahasuerus has done, twice now, just in the preface to the book. First, we saw the king take on the counsel of his advisors to eliminate his queen. There was no counterargument made by the king—no line of questioning to indicate a weighing of options, or how to mete out justice. Based on Girard’s interpretation of similar texts, I believe Girard here would determine that Ahasuerus mimetically took on the desire of Memucan in this scene. Second, the king imitates the desire of his attendants who seek out beautiful virgins for him, immediately turning away from the content of his own thoughts. We have in Ahasuerus a chameleon; one who mimetically replicates the desires of those around him. If there is a core being within him, it is seen only briefly in his reflection about Vashti—a being that evaporates just as quickly, supplanted by the wishes of others.

The king, in this light, is not “bad” in any moral sense. In fact, we might see him as a tragic character meant to provide a lesson on how mimesis

For there to be an effective, sacralizing act of transference, it is necessary that the victim should inherit all the violence from which the community has been exonerated. It is because the victim genuinely passes as guilty that the transference does not come to the fore as such. This piece of conjuring brings about the happy result for which the lynching mob is profoundly grateful... (*Things Hidden*, 169)

In order for a text to be “mythic”, it would have to take “no account of the arbitrary and unjust character of the violence which is done to Jesus. In fact the opposite is the case: the Passion is presented as a blatant piece of injustice.” (*Things Hidden*, 170)

Girard states this in relation to Jesus, but it is applicable here. This is an appropriate prelude to a story that intends to unravel this myth, by first exposing it for what it is. Vashti’s seemingly unjust demise also puts the reader on alert for what will eventually confront Esther. Will Esther become a scapegoat, too? This is what the author leads the reader to expect.

operates. The king is completely mimetic—a blank slate. He takes on the desires of those within his influence; his desire is entirely patterned after the desires of others. Timothy Beal puts it well: “In the absence of God, King Ahasuerus is a kind of trick mirror, reflecting that absence in his own vacuousness. His void mimics the void of divine power/presence/authority in the story world...He is profoundly superficial...literally, *farced*: stuffed with the interests and objectives of those around him.”²⁴³ Thus, significantly, it is only when Ahasuerus is *alone* (and to note without alcohol or anger) that his own thought emerges. We do see this briefly in the account above as well as later on when the king has insomnia. But when the king is among others, we will consistently see that he gets caught up in the mimetic contagion of those around him, exerting no will that one could call his own, catching the disease of mimetic violence.

It is my sense that this preface, then, in which we have a typical scapegoating scenario, we also have a departure from the persecution texts. The biblical narrator includes just a moment of literally *sober* reflection on the scapegoating event: the king’s deliberation about what he had done to Vashti opens up doubt about the punishment inflicted, also raising the possibility of the innocence of the victim. What had been done in anger and insobriety could have been wrong. Thus, I assert, there is just the inkling of an attempt in this preface to “redeem” the narrative, even the Babylonian “victim.” But despite the fact that there is an attempt to hear the voice of the victim, it does not prevail. The cultural context in which the voice of the victim is trying to be heard is still closed off to it. How come? Because *the cultural context in the preface to the Book of Esther is a kingdom that uses the scapegoat mechanism as its operating principle*. As in all other persecution texts, this victim is accused and then swept under the rug, erased. The differentiating factor in this narrative from its pagan counterparts is that *those who are operating the mechanism are drunk, unaware, and ludicrous*. Thus, the contemporaneous Jewish reader would neither have

²⁴³ Beal, 118.

identified with the Babylonian “victim”, nor with the vacuous and drunken king. The persecution text as it is written in Esther cannot be endorsed by the Jew; rather, it is construed as exaggerated, even ludicrous. But even as the reader might understand the system to be in error, as of yet there is no structure to replace it.

This episode leaves the reader with a temporary if unsettling peace, but alas—the mechanism *does* work to effect a fragile reconciliation, so one can at least move on (until mimesis strikes again.) The preface to the Book of Esther brilliantly serves to reveal the prevailing scapegoat mechanism, exposing the Jew’s inability to be inside of the narrative, while at the same time giving just a hint of an opening. Queen Esther will be brought into the narrative soon, and will provide an obvious parallel to Vashti. But as the true voice of the “victim” from the perspective of the biblical narrator, Esther will be redeemed.

An Ancient Sibling Rivalry Continued: Haman and Mordecai

I assert above that the preface to the Book of Esther, which runs from chapter 1 through chapter 2:4, is a classic persecution text, with a glimmer of self-awareness of its own nature as such in the regret of the king over Vashti’s expulsion. This is an important foreshadowing of what is to take place in the main body of the book, which I will demonstrate is another persecution text, though this time entirely unveiled, and turned on its head in favor of the “victim.”²⁴⁴ At the same time, I will demonstrate that this redemption cannot yet

²⁴⁴ The narrative beautifully parallels the revelation of the mechanism. Esther, at first, must keep her identity as a Jew concealed, which takes place inside of the mechanism unfolding through the story (Haman is in rivalry both with Mordecai and the king, and the Jews are the scapegoats about to be slaughtered.) When Esther reveals herself to the king, the mechanism is made visible, the scapegoats are redeemed, and justice is served upon Haman.

be complete, as it is literarily and historically stuck within the framework of a sacrificial system.²⁴⁵

Before moving on to how the event of scapegoating is transformed, it is necessary to unfold the narrative and its new cast of mimetic characters. In this next section of the Book of Esther, one reads about an archetypal “sibling” rivalry between Mordecai and Haman, illustrating in no uncertain terms how mimesis operates and escalates. I will examine these two characters and their interrelations in detail.

Chapter 2, verse 5 introduces Mordecai into the story.

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Est. 2:5-6).

Berlin comments that: “Mordecai is given top billing...The information given about Mordecai suggests to the reader that he is a clearly identified and prominent Jew of the Babylonian exile, with an obliquely expressed link to King Saul.”²⁴⁶ Two features of Mordecai’s introduction stand out: his genealogy; and his exilic status. To address the latter point first, the root for exile (*g-l-h*) is mentioned three times in this short introduction, emphasizing Mordecai’s status as an exiled Jew. Berlin offers that this enabled the readers of Esther in the Diaspora to easily identify with Mordecai; Levenson offers that this emphasizes the powerlessness and vulnerability of the Jews in contrast to the luxury and power with which the Persian court was introduced.²⁴⁷ Mordecai is, further, “foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle’s daughter, for she had

²⁴⁵ The notion of a redeemed persecution text that takes action in favor of the victim is correlative to the working of the modern justice system, i.e. the guilty party is punished.

²⁴⁶ Berlin, 24.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 25.

neither father nor mother” (Est. 2:7a). The image of Mordecai as exiled, and presumably a single parent to an orphan girl, paints a humble image – one senses the extra burdens that would be upon the shoulders of these two uprooted individuals.

Despite the powerlessness that Levenson would emphasize, though, Mordecai’s genealogy and associations characterize him as a prominent Jew. “Genealogies are often designed to give the reader information about the status or location of a character, rather than a scientifically accurate family tree...by virtue of Mordecai’s being a *yehudi* and a Benjaminite he is a symbol of the authentic exilic Jew.”²⁴⁸ The Talmudic rabbis affirmed Mordecai’s stature as a scholar, as a wise and learned man, as well as one with leadership quality.²⁴⁹

Chapter 2 continues and tells the story of Esther’s rise to become Ahasuerus’ new queen, all the while following the advice of Mordecai. Mordecai stayed as close to Esther as possible during her trial period in the harem. Once Esther is secure in her role in the palace, Mordecai continues to stay as near her as possible—“at the palace gate”—always checking in on her. It is while Mordecai was at the palace gate in chapter 2:21 that he overhears a plot by the angry eunuchs Bigthan and Teresh to overtake the king. Mordecai immediately reports the plot to Esther who in turn reports it to Ahasuerus. Mordecai’s information is proven correct, and the eunuchs are impaled on stakes.

The plot of the eunuchs takes place over only two verses, and seems, like Vashti’s narrative, a rather insignificant episode. Yet it is an integral set-up for the rivalry that informs the rest of the book of Esther. Commentaries will point out how this episode foreshadows the events following it in the book, and how Mordecai’s act of informing the king of the eunuch’s plot is necessary to receiving his reward later in the story. All of this I find to be part of an accurate

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 24-5

²⁴⁹ Fox lists the qualities which have made Mordecai an ideal figure in many threads of rabbinic tradition and Jewish interpretation: his Jewishness; wisdom; pride; courage; loyalty to the king; leadership; loyalty to the Jewish people; lack of personal ambition; and directness. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 185-190.

interpretation. What we also have here in this mini-episode, however, is yet a second example of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. As Berlin explains: “This episode is recounted succinctly, with no motives ascribed to the culprits, which gave rise to a range of speculations to fill the gap, including jealousy of Mordecai, jealousy of Esther, and anger at the king for his treatment of Vashti.”²⁵⁰ It is true, as Berlin states, the narrative is bare and promotes speculation—this is a characteristic of the book on the whole. But this bare bones narrative underscores once again the basic operation of the mechanism: there is a clear rivalry between the eunuchs and the king, the presence of anger, a threat of imminent chaos because of dissention within the kingdom, and the scapegoating of the king (for what will remain an undisclosed reason).

While the structure remains consistent, the episode of the eunuchs does present a shift in content. Unlike in the Vashti episode, the scapegoat (i.e., the king) is not the one who receives the punishment in this case. Rather, there is a judicial inquiry, the conspirators are found guilty, and they receive punishment in kind. The narrative provides the sense that justice has been served, and a scapegoat situation avoided—though there is still blood (i.e. the blood of the eunuchs) necessary for reconciliation. The eunuchs episode provides a step away from the problematic persecution of Vashti in the preface, revealing the same persecution mechanism that was underway with Vashti now targeting the king. Here, however, the lynching is intercepted by Mordecai, the target is reaffixed to the backs of the eunuchs themselves. The eunuchs episode is a clear foreshadowing of Haman’s demise later in the narrative, which we will speak of shortly.

Chapter 3 begins right after Mordecai’s disclosure of the eunuch’s plot and oddly states that: “Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials” (Est. 3:1-2). The reader expects Mordecai to have been advanced for his good deed, but instead we meet a new character, Haman. Why

²⁵⁰ Berlin, 31.

Haman was promoted is not stated; further, his advancement is emphasized, even glorified, through repetitious vocabulary (e.g. “promoted”, “advanced”, “higher”).

We are then told:

All the king’s courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king’s order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low. Then the king’s courtiers who were in the palace gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you disobey the king’s order?” When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai’s resolve would prevail; for he had explained that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai’s people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus (Est. 3:2-6).

For the third time in only three chapters (indeed, once per chapter), we hear of the connection of anger and violence: Vashti’s refusal created anger in the king, and her expulsion followed; the eunuchs were reported to have been angry and seeking the king’s harm, and they wound up impaled; and here we have Haman angered because of Mordecai’s refusal to bow.²⁵¹ All three episodes share a strange absence of explicit motive as well. The text never tells us why Vashti refused to come before the king; neither do we learn why the eunuchs wanted to

²⁵¹ We have already discussed the connection of anger with the yetzer ha-ra, the evil inclination, in chapter two. Jewish sources are in most cases extremely critical about anger. They consider anger the result of the evil inclination, even likening it to idolatry. Ecclesiastes 7:9, for example, states that, “Anger dwells in the bosom of fools;” and the Talmud states: “Whoever is enraged, all kinds of demons have power over him.” In the case of Ephraim and Manasseh, we discussed Ephraim’s sacrifice as the sacrifice of the evil inclination that would precede the coming of the Davidic messiah. We also pointed out Manasseh’s ability to control his evil impulse even when given the lesser blessing. Unlike Cain, Esau, or Joseph’s brothers, Manasseh kept his yetzer ha-ra in check, and avoided the mimetic rivalry that would have led to yet one more instance of sibling violence. Haman’s uncontrolled anger is even more noteworthy given this context. Haman was promoted, not Mordecai, thus we have the one who ironically *received* the blessing yet still failed to be whole.

kill the king; nor do we learn why Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman.²⁵²

The motive is clearly rivalry, though where the rivalry stems from in the first two cases is unknown according to the text. Regarding the third instance concerning Mordecai and Haman, however, the biblical text gives us a very big hint.

There is a long-standing rivalry between the families of Mordecai and Haman. There is thus not only the surprise of Haman receiving the king's promotion instead of Mordecai, but the shock of who Haman is: Haman is "son of Hammedatha the Agagite" (Est. 3:1). This declaration of lineage, like that of Mordecai, would have been immediately recognizable to the ancient Jew. Mordecai's link through Benjamin to King Saul stands in direct tension with Haman's link to King Agag (the Amalekite) mentioned in Samuel 15:8, calling up a memory of battle and ancient hatred in the history of Israel. In Samuel 15, King Saul is commanded by the Lord to destroy the Amalekites led by King Agag. The prophet Samuel communicates this message to Saul:

The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' (I Samuel 15:1-4).

As the story goes, however, Saul has mercy on King Agag and does not kill him. This act of mercy costs Saul the kingship, and leads to the necessity of Samuel killing Agag the next day in order to fulfill the divine command. In a midrash on

²⁵² The various scapegoating episodes are linked linguistically, too. Verse 6 states that Haman "disdained" to lay hands on Mordecai alone—where "disdain" (*b-z-h*, disdain, despise or scorn) is the same word used in the preface to Esther when describing what Memucan fears the women do (Est. 1:17). The words "lay hands on" (*b-q-sh*, seek, plot) are also repetitive of the verbs used to describe the eunuch's plot in chapter two of Esther, drawing a further link between Haman's creating a scapegoat, and the episodes of Vashti and the eunuchs. See Berlin, 37.

the Book of Esther, the rabbis assert that in the one night King Agag remains alive, Agag impregnates a woman whose lineage leads directly to Haman.

Mordecai responded to Esther saying: "...[R]emember that you come from the descendents of King Saul of Israel; and it was told to the king of Israel to destroy the memory of the dynasty of Amalek from beneath the heavens. But he had pity on Agag, their king, and kept him by his side. That very night a woman became pregnant from him, and Haman arose from his descendants [and] has been seeking to buy all of the Jews and to uproot them completely. As a consequence of your ancestor having had pity on their king Agag, he became a stumbling block for [Israel]."²⁵³

The rabbis continue: "Lo, a scion shall spring forth from him who shall inflict on you hardships like thrones in your eyes and pricks in your sides. Who will this be? Haman, who decreed to destroy, to kill and to annihilate."²⁵⁴ Through Haman, Amalek, the hater of the Jews, is understood to remain in the world.

Segal also expounds upon the rivalry between Haman and Mordecai's ancestors, and remarks that the failure of Saul to kill Agag is a primary motif of the rabbinic midrashim on the Megillah. Segal continues that:

...most biblical commentators would agree that by tracing the ancestries of Mordecai and Haman to Saul and Agag respectively, the author of Esther expected his readers to make precisely that connection and to interpret the drama in Shushan as a playing-out of the fundamental war between Israel and Amalek.²⁵⁵

Segal also adds in a note that, "This association is of course central to the liturgical function of the Megillah-reading, which is invariably linked to the Amalek

²⁵³ *Targum Sheni* 4:13 quoted in Elaine Rose Glickman, *Haman and the Jews: A Portrait from Rabbinic Literature* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 26.

²⁵⁴ *Esther Rabbah Proem* 7, quoted in Glickman, 26.

²⁵⁵ Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, v. 2, 20. Segal cites P. Haupt and C.A. Moore as commentators who have stated agreement on this point.

passages of the Pentateuch.”²⁵⁶ Segal here is referring to the texts linked to Esther in the liturgical days surrounding Purim. For example, on the Sabbath before the celebration of Purim, the *chumash* reading in synagogue is Exodus 17, which recounts the original attack of Amalek upon the Hebrews in the desert. The reason for the vicious attack on the Amalekites and King Agag in I Samuel quoted above has its root in this Exodus passage. Right after the Hebrews flee Egypt to worship Yahweh in the desert, it is reported that the Amalekites attacked them at Rephidim (Exod. 17:8). Rabbinic tradition adds that the attack on the Hebrews by Amalek was particularly hateful for two reasons: 1) they were the first to attack the freed nation, thereby opening the door for others to attack them; and 2) they attacked those at the back of the group – those who were slower, namely, the elderly, the weak, and the children. For these two reasons, the Amalekites are particularly hated. To an archetypal extent, the name of the nation boiled down to a single entity “Amalek” to denote those who violently prey on the weak and underrepresented. The liturgical context for the Book of Esther, its holiday Purim, and the character of Haman, is the evil of Amalek who preys on the weak.

The biblical text is not merciful on Amalek in the episode from Exodus, and makes clear that Amalek is not just this violent nation, but a symbol that will resonate for future generations and across cultures. After Moses manages to defeat Amalek in this episode, the Lord declares: “Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (Exod. 17:14). Moses responds by building an altar to the Lord, saying: “The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Exod. 17:16b).²⁵⁷ From this passage, one

²⁵⁶ Ibid. The Midrash Esther also emphasizes prayer as Mordecai’s principal weapon in the struggle with Haman, of course reflecting a rabbinic value in general, but finding support in certain biblical passages like Esther 4:1, too. See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, v. 2, 38.

²⁵⁷ This passage in Exodus gives the divine command for the reading of the Book of Esther aloud on Purim, and for the “blotting out” of Haman, which is reenacted not only in the Esther narrative, but in ritual.

understands that this rivalry—this war—will extend far into the future through Haman and beyond.

The history of hatred, violence and revenge does not just span future time, however; it also goes farther back in time than even the attack of the Amalekites on the Hebrews. This rivalry goes all the way back to Jacob and Esau, the rival twin brothers we have already had the occasion to discuss, in the Book of Genesis. Amalek, indeed, is said to be Esau's grandson; thus Haman's lineage stems from Esau as well. The rivalry between Esau and his brother is famous, centered on Jacob's usurpation of his brother's blessing and birthright in Genesis 27. The enmity of Esau toward his brother after this episode is explicit in Esau's words: "So Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father shall draw near and then I shall kill my brother Jacob'" (Gen. 27:41). The biblical author gives the sense that we are still in the realm of Cain and Abel, as the vitriol is apparent in Esau's oath to murder his brother over a blessing.

In the biblical text, however, it must be remembered that Jacob does not steal his brother's birthright without some sense of complicity from Esau. Esau, we are told, sells it for a "mess of pottage" (Genesis 24: 27-34). The rabbis get air under their wings from this episode and boldly characterize Esau as absolute evil, ascribing to Esau a multitude of sins in addition to those the scriptures explicitly state. A few examples of the sins they ascribe to Esau are as follows:

Another comment on "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalms 14:1). "Fool" refers to the wicked Esau. Why was he called fool [*nava*l]? R. Judah explained in the name of R. Samuel: Because he filled the whole earth with obscenity [*nave*luf]. Everywhere he set up thrones for gods who are no more than thorns, refuges for deities who are mere refuse, ribald theaters, and bloody circuses.²⁵⁸

R. Phineas and R. Hilkiah taught in the name of R. Simon...Like the boar which displays its cloven hoof, as if to say: "I am clean," so wicked Esau displays himself so openly on the seats of justice that

²⁵⁸ *Midrash Psalms* 14:3, accessed January 19, 2012, <http://www.sacred-texts.com>.

the legal tricks whereby he robs, steals, and plunders appear to be just proceedings. (*Midrash Psalms* 80:6)

“[Isaac] called Esau, his elder son, saying to him, ‘My son,’ and Esau replied, ‘Here I am’” (Genesis 27:1). The Holy Spirit also proclaims: “‘When [Esau’s] speech is gracious, do not believe him; for there are seven abominations in his heart’” (Proverbs 26:25).²⁵⁹

And Esau’s demise does not end here. In the Rabbinic literature in particular, the conflict between Jacob and Esau also becomes an archetypal rivalry. Esau is:

...identified with Edom (Genesis 36.1) and, on the critical view, the Esau-Jacob narratives reflect the conflict between the Israelites and the neighboring people of Edom. In the later Rabbinic period, Edom is identified with Rome and the narratives are read as a foretelling of the love-hate relationship between Rome and the Jewish people. Later still Edom (Rome) is identified in Jewish literature as the Christian Church, the narratives now being read as reflecting the rivalry between the two religions of Christianity and Judaism.²⁶⁰

As early as the Second Temple (as evidenced in the Qumran scrolls, for example), Esau is Rome—he is a symbol of anti-Jewish hatred, idolatry, oppression and evil. Further, hatred is inherited. Thus Esau’s enmity against the Jews is passed down from generation to generation:

...and Amalek was Esau’s grandson, as it is said: “And Timna bore to Eliphaz Amalek” (*Genesis* 36:12). R. Aha taught: Why did Esau command Amalek his grandson and not command Eliphaz his son? Only because Eliphaz had grown up in the bosom of Isaac and would not heed [Esau’s command] to kill Israel and make war upon them. Thus Esau commanded Amalek. What did Amalek do?

²⁵⁹ *Tanchuma Buber Toledot* 8, quoted in Glickman, 19-20. A similar text can be found in *Genesis Rabbah* 65:11.

²⁶⁰ Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (US: Oxford University Press, 1995), 149.

When Israel came out of Egypt immediately he came upon them, as it is said: “Then came Amalek” (*Exodus* 17:8).²⁶¹

As Glickman explains: “The mantle is passed to another generation; the characters change, but the theme remains the same. The enemy—once Esau, now Amalek—still pursues God’s beloved—once only Jacob, now the collective people Israel.”²⁶²

What we have in these ancestors of Haman and Mordecai is therefore a deeply entrenched mimetic rivalry spanning generations all the way back to Jacob and Esau. It seems these current two “brothers” forgot that their ancestors made peace, though. It is unfortunate and yet a profound example of how both Ephraim (the destruction of the evil inclination) and Manasseh (letting go of the past) are forgotten, even denied; the mind and heart slip into the familiar pattern of rivalry and violence. We will return to this idea later, and in terms of how it pertains specifically in the context of Esther. For now, to bring this entrenched rivalry into the context of our current analytical structure, I will discuss how the rivalry between Mordecai and Haman fulfills the three criteria of the persecution text.

According to Girard’s analysis of the generic persecution text, as we have previously discussed, this kind of intense mimetic rivalry creates the mimetic crisis in which there is a “dissolution in conflict, removal of the differences and hierarchies which constitute the community in its wholeness.”²⁶³ In parallel structure to the opening preface of the Book of Esther in which Vashti refuses the king, here Mordecai refuses Haman. As in the Vashti episode, too, Vashti’s refusal was irrationally projected outward as a threat to the entire kingdom; her refusal was interpreted as the act that would incite a confusion of social roles and gender roles throughout the land, causing mayhem and social breakdown. Mordecai’s refusal to bow down before Haman is equally construed by Haman.

²⁶¹ *Midrash Hagadol Vayishlack*, *Genesis* 36:6, quoted in Glickman, 21.

²⁶² Glickman, 22.

²⁶³ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 141-2.

His act not only creates a sense of social resistance to Haman's authority, though; given the history or rivalry between the ancestors of these two characters, Mordecai's refusal is one more example of disrespect to the "first-born" by the younger sibling. Jacob takes the birthright and blessing meant for Esau—Jacob reverses the family hierarchy. Here, Haman (like Esau) is the one in the natural position of power, but Mordecai does not acknowledge his status. Mordecai's refusal, like Vashti's refusal, is understood as a rebellion against social hierarchy and a threat to social order.

Haman is incensed by this collapse into "sameness." Mordecai's refusal to bow puts him on equal footing with Haman—they are still the rivaling twins, Jacob and Esau, fighting for superiority. Haman, threatened by this sameness, however, differentiates Mordecai from himself according to his religious beliefs and sets out to use the power of King Ahasuerus and his kingdom to eradicate the Jewish community that, according to Haman's edict, operates according to its own laws. Professor Rabbi Jonathan Magonet draws on the lineage of Haman from Amalek to comment on the sameness generated between these rivals:

We forget that the information that he is an Agagite tells us not only that he comes from the line of Israel's enemies, but also that *he, too, is an outsider* in the Persian court. When he speaks of the people scattered throughout the land whose laws are different from those of every other people (3:8), he is also *describing, in a projection, some aspect of his own outsider status*. For Haman, too, is insecure, part of a minority group, relying on his wealth or other keys to power to maintain his position, ready to invent a scapegoat to insure the continuance of his power. Haman is nothing more than the *alternative face of Mordecai, a distorted reflection* of the same character...and perhaps it is that deeper relationship that Rava is pointing towards when he says that a man is obliged to drink so much wine on Purim that he becomes incapable of knowing whether he is cursing Haman or blessing Mordecai.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ Jonathan Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (London, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2003), 180. Emphasis added.

Beal comments on Magonet's words:

It is Haman's *identity with* Mordecai as mutual outsiders, *other* to the present political regime, that in turn leads to Haman's projection of what he hates about himself onto Mordecai and the Jews. Mordecai is Haman's negative image. In this sense, Esther is not about the distinctiveness of the Jew over and against Haman, but the *ambiguity* of identity, the fuzzy area between and among identities.²⁶⁵

Magonet and Beal are both drawing on the same condition of *sameness* that, according to Girard, constitutes a mimetic crisis that leads to the *all against one* phenomenon and the creation of a scapegoat. Beal and Magonet draw on the sameness in terms of foreignness, however, while using Girardian analysis, I explain the sameness due to their legacy of, literally, twin brothers at war. In fact, what Magonet and Beal overlook in their interpretation is precisely that these two rivals share more than being foreigners-- they are actually related to each other.

Beal's analysis of the Esther text, in focusing on self-projection, looks over one other crucial point that emerges when Mordecai and Haman are interpreted in the context of their ancestry: Haman is in fact the one who attains the "blessing" and is promoted; Mordecai, despite his good deed and demonstrated loyalty to the king, is passed over. Haman, therefore, is the "brother" with the upper hand—he is the one in power—and like the "first-borns" before him, Haman seems to have gotten his position due to some kind of unwritten primogeniture. The text does not explain why Haman was promoted; but it is clear that Haman was promoted despite Mordecai's demonstrated loyalty and conscientiousness. Also, despite the text's implication that Haman's promotion is unwarranted, and while there is clearly some inherited ire on both ends of the Mordecai-Haman relationship, Mordecai maintains his self-control while Haman

²⁶⁵ Beal, 58.

becomes angry. As we have seen in previous instances, too, anger is a clear indication in the text that there is an imminent mimetic crisis.

It is at this point that we enter the second phase of the persecution text: the *all against one*. The “one” here is not a single individual scapegoat, however, but a communal scapegoat, that is, all the Jews. Haman focuses not only on persecuting Mordecai, but plans full-scale genocide of “all of Mordecai’s people.” Haman goes to the king to request the Jews’ extermination as follows:

There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other people in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction... (Esther 3.8-9).

In response to Haman’s request, the king proves to be as impressionable as he had been earlier when advised to expel Vashti. The king is unaware the identity of the people of whom Haman speaks, but he is clearly still operating inside of his role as a blank mimetic slate, responding to Haman: “...the people are yours to do with as you see fit” (Esther 3.11b).

The text at this point reads with repetition and exaggeration to emphasize that Haman sends his edict “to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—and to plunder their possessions” (Esther 3.13b) out to “every people” and “every province,” and “to every people in their own language” (Esther 3.12). In contrast to the somewhat comical edict in the Vashti episode, (i.e. for all husbands and wives to respect each other), what we have here is not funny at all; Haman’s edict calls for nothing short of a full-

blown genocide. Haman sets a day for the battle of *all against one*—the Jews are set for annihilation.²⁶⁶

What happens next in this second stage of persecution-- this *all against one* and the creation of the communal scapegoat to strengthen Haman's ties to the king-- is where the Book of Esther radically departs from other types of persecution texts, including that of Vashti. The radical turn we see in Esther is only foreshadowed by the short tale of the eunuch conspiracy in which the scapegoated king is saved, and the guilty conspirators executed (foreshadowing the substitution of Haman for Esther in the events following). The reader may take some solace in the fact that justice is and will be served, and the guilty party executed, in both of these episodes. But *there is something else* -- a crucial occurrence that makes this persecution text even more distinct from the other two we have examined, as well as from their pagan antecedents: Esther is the link between Haman and Mordecai—she is in the royal court, yet a Jew—and the perfect victim. Yet even as the self-proclaimed victim, she has the power to orchestrate her own sacrificial ritual, ending with a sacrifice in which she is released from her victimhood. She accomplishes this through *extraordinary self-control, self-disclosure, knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism, and voluntary self-sacrifice*. Though Jewish ritual has often focused on Mordecai as the hero of this book, the book resides in Esther's name. I assert this is so, as I will demonstrate, because she is the only one in the narrative who has knowledge of the mechanism and the courage and skill necessary to carry it out on her own terms.

²⁶⁶ Unlike the earlier Vashti episode, too, here we have not a Babylonian Queen as our scapegoat, but rather Mordecai and the Jews—thus the intended reader is likely immediately empathic. Here is a “victim” with whom the reader identifies, for the reader is implied to be one of Mordecai's people scheduled for extermination. Even if one admits that Mordecai's refusal to bow was an act of stubbornness or pride (and I believe the correct interpretation is that his dignity would not allow him to bow to an ancestor of Amalek), all the Jews that will suffer on account of his one act of refusal are certainly “innocent” victims in their being the subjects of undue blame, likely the reader included.

Esther: A Redeemed Scapegoat in a Scapegoating World

When Esther walks into the inner court of the king, she understands that she may be walking to her own death. The reader might have expected a strong emotional plea to the king, or perhaps a request for vengeance. Yet Esther does neither. Instead of heating up in fury at Haman's despicable edict, she in fact slows time down, cools things off, and commands a fast. Esther displays extraordinary strength of character through her own effort; she is grounded, fully rational, unable to be ruffled, with keen understanding of the ways of those around her; she has a mind for strategy, and tangible self-control.²⁶⁷ An analysis of the sequence of the events surrounding Esther's self-disclosure as a scapegoat will demonstrate her courage as well as her impeccable control over her mimetic inclination and yetzer ha-ra while she navigates a dire situation. In addition, she demonstrates such insight into the workings of the mimetic and scapegoating mechanism that she succeeds in substituting Haman as the scapegoat for herself. Through my demonstrations, I will show that Esther is in complete control of what she is doing throughout the next episode of her book—she in essence designs and orchestrates a ceremonial ritual to save the Jews, and turn the tables on Haman.

From the beginning of Esther's appearance in the book, she earns favor from all those who come into contact with her. She won the favor of "Hegai, the guardian of women" (Esther 2.8), and indeed "won the admiration of all who saw her" (Esther 2.15). It is not a surprise to the reader that, when her time to meet the king had come, "the king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins" (Esther 2.16). Not coincidentally, Esther is placed in direct parallel to Vashti by the text, which then notes: "So he (the king) set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen

²⁶⁷ In contrast, we witness Haman's continued emotional rage. Haman continues in his incessant need for admiration, wounded pride, and frivolous exercises to take out revenge on Mordecai, culminating in his building of a stake as tall as a seven-story building on which to impale his rival.

instead of Vashti” (Esther 2.17). It was Vashti who had refused to wear the royal diadem before the king in the preface to the book. Here we have Esther wearing that diadem, and specifically declared Vashti’s replacement. The text sets Esther up as the next Vashti, recalling Vashti’s fate from the preface, and preparing the reader for the possibility that Esther, as the next queen, may meet a similar fate.

We read only one chapter further into the book, in fact, until Esther, like Vashti, is indeed faced with a life or death situation. The situation is one of her own life and death, and also the life and death of all her people. In chapter four, Esther learns of Haman’s edict to exterminate the Jews from Mordecai, thereby affirming Esther’s parallel to Vashti as yet another queen who faces expulsion. The exchange between Esther and Mordecai takes place through Esther’s eunuch messenger, Hathach, who delivers messages back and forth. The exchange is significant. As Michael Fox explains:

The turning point in Esther’s development comes at the end of the scene, in 4:15-16. It is abrupt and surprising. She resolves to do her duty, and a change immediately comes upon her...Esther is assuming a role of a religious and national leader...She has taken control, giving Mordecai instructions, enjoining a fast on the Jews, and deciding to act contrary to law. Her resolute behavior marks a woman determined to work her way through a crisis...”²⁶⁸

Though I disagree with Fox’s narrow view of leadership, I do agree that it is in this scene that Esther becomes the key figure in the book. She is faced with an impossible situation: either stay concealed and face the death of her people (and

²⁶⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 199-200. To this point, Fox explains, Esther had been a passive character to the extent of being (in Beal’s words) nothing more than ‘an object of exchange between men’. Fox states that, “Esther is putty—not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation. Nothing has ever challenged her to be anything more” (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 197). I take issue with both Beal and Fox’s characterizations of Esther as passive ‘object’ – even given her role early on in the book. Esther’s actions and character always seem appropriate to her circumstances. Equating leadership quality to “active,” as opposed to “passive” responsibilities, is to restrict leadership to stereotypical “masculine” personas. Esther, I would argue, demonstrates leadership in both her passive and active roles.

possibly herself); or seek presence with the king and face execution due to disobeying the king's law. The Book of Esther has previous to this point scapegoated both Jews and a Queen—and Esther is both. Her prognosis does not look good. The reader is very interested in what she will do. And she reveals exactly what she will do next. After a strong prompt from Mordecai in 4.13, Esther comes forth with a striking command and declaration: "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"

Esther's command to her community and declaration of self-sacrifice constitute an astounding act of leadership and courage, and her words are important for two immediate reasons: her counter-action to the mimetic crisis Haman created, and her willing self-sacrifice.

First, in commanding a fast, Esther manages to immediately counteract the mimetic turmoil that had taken over Shushan due to the release of Haman's edict. Esther organizes the community of Jews, commands a fast, and focuses their energy on a single purpose, at once eliminating chaos and fostering order and control. One can only imagine that the city quieted down in fasting; instead of the city being "dumbfounded" and "in turmoil", the inhabitants act with purpose. Further, fasting is ritualistically an act that encourages control of the base human impulses, bringing to awareness and subduing the yetzer ha-ra. Esther, in commanding a fast in the midst of a mimetic crisis, seems to be saying: 'do not give in to rivalry or to violence; regain your control; stay calm.' I agree with Fox that Esther reveals herself as a public leader: Esther instills hope, confidence and calm in her people; Esther generates order and focus in direct opposition to Haman whose commands generate only chaos and frenzy. Even without an expulsion, Esther is able to begin de-escalating a situation of mimetic crisis—she organizes a fast to rekindle a sense of self-control among the people, and she unites them in action in line with her purpose. Under threat of violent

extermination, Esther “organizes her troops” with non-violent and mindful direction.

The second point of interest here is that Esther voluntarily puts her own life on the line for her people; in Girardian terms, she takes on being the victim for her people. We have here, in fact, one of the most important distinctions of the book: Esther is Girard’s “Logos of Love” – a figure who “puts up no resistance; it always allows itself to be expelled by the Logos of violence.”²⁶⁹ And Esther is twice vulnerable to attack as both queen and Jew. As queen, she is in no way different from Vashti. Esther makes it very clear as well, that entering the presence of the king unbidden will mean transgressing a law and making herself vulnerable to death. In ironic contrast to Vashti, Esther will break a law by entering the king’s presence whereas Vashti had broken the law by refusing to show herself. The reader, and likely Esther, is aware of her predecessor’s fate; Esther is voluntarily putting her life on the line. As Jew as well, Esther is twice the potential scapegoat. Not coincidentally, Esther’s identity as Jew has been concealed to the court thus far in the book. Revealing her identity (as she soon will) will make her vulnerable, like the rest of her community, to death.

After Esther declares her commitment to her people, and her own self-sacrificing act, she embarks on a plan that is equally remarkable, displaying not just her ability to subdue her mimetic inclination, but a ritual sensibility—a plan which is more a rite, a series of choreographed actions, which will require an appropriate, and sacrificial, finale. After fasting herself for three days (replacing what beauty routines might have made her more attractive to the king for a clear mind, controlled emotional state, and purified body), Esther puts what seems her carefully ritualized plan into action.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 274.

²⁷⁰ Fasting in Judaism and other world religions is intended not just for purification of the body, but for the spirit. Fasting in Judaism, in particular, is to lend external support for the control of the base instincts constituting the yetzer ha-ra. This point will be taken up further in chapter four.

The context in which Esther comes forth with her request, i.e. the banquet, is the arena for such a ritualized sacrifice to take place. Girard, as aforementioned, provides no analysis of the Book of Esther, but he does provide an analysis of the beheading of John the Baptist in his book *The Scapegoat* – a scene that has similar attributes. In his analysis of John the Baptist's beheading, Girard comments on the mimetic nature of banquets in general. He states: "The suitable occasion, Herod's birthday, has a ritual character; it is a feast that recurs every year; festive, or ritual, activities take place on the occasion."²⁷¹ Girard continues: "All the activities mentioned by the text are also found in ritual and usually culminate in a sacrificial immolation. John's murder occupies the place and moment of sacrifice."²⁷² What Girard is saying here is that the banquet during which Saint John the Baptist is executed, is in fact a ritual in itself that replicates the mimetic crisis and scapegoating mechanism. The beheading, further, becomes necessary as the capstone of the mimetic escalation generated through the banquet (in particular through Salome's dance). In fact, for Girard, understanding the banquet as a mimetic event is the only way the text becomes understandable:

Far from neglecting the ritual and institutional aspects of the text, by using desire to interpret them I am creating the only framework that makes ritual intelligible. It not only resembles the final stages of the mimetic crisis that are resolved spontaneously by the scapegoat mechanism, but it is also a complete replica of the crises from which it cannot be distinguished. This replication is perfectly feasible because, as we have seen, ritual is the mimetic repetition of an original mimetic crisis...It is totally *mimesis*, imitation, the scrupulous repetition of the crisis. The rite does not provide any real solution, it merely recopies the solution that occurred spontaneously. There is therefore no structural difference between the rite itself and the spontaneous, natural course of the mimetic crisis.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 138.

²⁷² Ibid., 139.

²⁷³ Ibid.

For Girard, the banquet *is* the same as the rite that inevitably ends with an expulsion; it is yet one more imitation of the violent, originating event.

I propose that the author of Esther understands the banquet in this same way. One might in fact analyze the Book of Esther and its series of banquets in this Girardian sense—as rites that end with a sacrifice.; they are mimetic feasts, if you will, characterized appropriately by drunkenness, irrationality, and excess. The Book of Esther, to demonstrate, begins with two grand banquets (a king’s banquet and a queen’s banquet), at the end of which Vashti is expelled. A banquet likewise occurs when Esther is made queen, after which the eunuchs’ plot is discovered and they are impaled. Further, the king and Haman sit down to feast after the Jews’ annihilation is announced. For every banquet, there is an affiliated mimetic rivalry and death.

It is in this context that Esther calls banquets of her own. Esther’s banquets may or may not be (the reader is not told) characterized by the same excess; but the reader does get the sense that Esther purposefully controls and ritualizes them. For example, each time Esther interacts with the king during the execution of her plan, the king states: “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled” (Esther 5.6; 7.2; also 5.4 when Esther approaches the king on his throne). And each time, Esther responds the same way: “If it please Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him” (Esther 5.4; 5.8). This interaction between Esther and the king occurs three times, building up the suspense, but more importantly ritualizing the behavior, establishing a linguistic pattern for the “sacrificial banquet,” and preparing the reader for the true climax of the rite/narrative. The ritualized behavior seems as intoxicating as the feast as well, and when Esther finally reveals her request, it is perhaps as shocking to the king (and also to Haman) as Salome’s asking for the head of John the Baptist.

Esther’s banquet ends with a sacrificial immolation as well—just as Girard would predict—but she is no longer the victim. In response to the king’s final articulated desire to fulfill Esther’s request, Esther states: “...let my life be

granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated” (Esther 7.3a). As before, Esther’s words are carefully chosen. She, first, avoids any speech that would make the king face his own culpability (placing blame upon him would be unhelpful and would have only accomplished perpetuating a cycle of blame.)²⁷⁴ Instead, Esther explains the situation softly, revealing herself as one of a scapegoated people about to be killed.²⁷⁵ Unlike pagan or, looking forward, Christian texts, which divinize their scapegoats, Esther is here alternatively “humanized.” In her self-revelation, she is made vulnerable. At the end of a series of ritualized linguistic exchanges, Esther in essence lays herself bare as the sacrificial finale, revealing her identity as one of the scapegoated, asking for her life to be spared.

And Esther’s life is spared. The king asks, then, who would be to blame for plotting against the queen’s life, to which Esther responds. But Esther does not ask for Haman’s execution in return. Rather, as in previous episodes, the king becomes angered and leaves the room. When he returns, the king is just as shocked to find Haman pleading with Esther for his life, which he interprets as Haman’s making sexual advances towards his queen.²⁷⁶ Haman is about to meet his end, becoming the scapegoat in place of the Jews he had prepared as scapegoats.

²⁷⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 200-202. Fox also notes Esther’s carefully strategized plan.

²⁷⁵ The past chapter has shown Ahasuerus’ very favorable response to Esther, even when she enters his presence without being called; it is clear that he loves her and he has the capacity to save her life. King Ahasuerus, hearing the situation explained in this fashion, perceives Haman’s edict as yet one more in a series of plots against the throne. It becomes personal for the king. Yet Levenson, on the other hand, remarks on how still the king is unable to make his own choices, requiring the advice of a lowly advisor. Jon Levenson, *Esther* (KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 105.

²⁷⁶ Interestingly, Girard asserts that religious and/or sexual infidelities are the most typical accusations made against the scapegoat. Even more, I reiterate what I quoted above from *The Scapegoat* where Girard defines the victim as “a person who comes from elsewhere, a well-known stranger. He is invited to a feast which ends with his lynching. Why? He has done something which he should not have done; his behavior is perceived as fatal; one of his gestures was misinterpreted.” (*The Scapegoat*, 32) Haman is indeed a typical Girardian victim.

In this third cycle of persecution, then, the *all against one* shifts twice: first the Jews are the collective ‘one’; then the focus turns to Esther as the self-sacrificing scapegoat; and finally the all against one shifts to Haman. It is important, too, that it is not just Esther and Ahasuerus that constitute the *all* when Haman is the accused *one*-- there is a conveniently situated eunuch who testifies against Haman in the moment the king’s anger is in flare, saying, “What is more, a stake is standing at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai—the man whose words saved the king” (Esther 7.9). With this encouragement from the eunuch, the king declares: “Impale him on it!” As in our previous persecution texts, the king takes on the mimetic desire of an “advisor” (here the eunuch) demonstrating again his extreme mimetic susceptibility. Esther, while not the advisor who suggests the sacrifice, has spun a scene as Salome, conjuring up a mimetic web, into which both the king and the eunuch fly. Esther has done this through the control and power of a ritual ceremony, though, which in the end has shown to be more effective than the erratic, desire-ridden, and frivolous efforts of Haman.

And here is perhaps the most critical point: Esther seems, according to our analysis, masterful at orchestrating ritual—she is self-controlled and strategic instead of emotion-driven-- she also lives in an environment that is quite the opposite, operating according to mimetic and scapegoating structures. I assert that Esther (meaning, to be clear, the author of the Book of Esther) *knows* that her environment operates according to this structure and *uses it to her advantage* to save herself and her people. Fox discusses certain commentaries on Esther that have painted her figure as cunning, manipulative, and even immoral.²⁷⁷ Perhaps she is, for she does generate her own sacrificial ritual of Haman—even if she does not ask for his expulsion herself. However, from our text we know that Haman *is* guilty—and Esther *is* innocent. She used the

²⁷⁷ Fox discusses the need for Esther to use tactics that are both contrary to Vashti (i.e., subtle, not strong-willed) as well as effective in the Persian court in general—tactics involving “manipulating the man in power” such as Haman and the king’s advisors have been seen to do. Fox is in agreement that Esther needed to employ these devices, but other scholars believe Esther, seen in this light, is acting in an unsavory fashion. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 201.

prevalent sacrificial structure to save her people, scapegoating the guilty party instead of those who are innocent.²⁷⁸ She culls the power from sacrificial ritual, which was perhaps the only way she thought she could succeed.

Maybe this is troubling—for essentially what we have in this Purim text is at once a Logos of Love who is willing to sacrifice herself for her people, but who at the same time employs the sacrificial mechanism to entrap the guilty. In the end, one must admit that Esther does not renounce violence, but saves the innocent victims from *within the system*. She is not, even though the reader may wish her to be, free. Girard's words on Hamlet provide some perspective:

No one wants to initiate a cycle of revenge that might literally annihilate humanity, and yet no one wants to give up revenge entirely. Like Hamlet, we are poised on the fence between total revenge and no revenge at all, unable to make up our mind, unable to take revenge and yet unable to renounce it...The enterprise is sick.²⁷⁹

Esther may indeed be literally, and literarily, trapped within a scapegoating structure, with no hope of success employing an alternative strategy. I assert, in fact, that her figure is trapped within the mythic structure of the persecution text. Her narrative is third in a series of persecution narratives as I have shown. Though one might wish she could completely renounce violence, Esther ultimately fails to escape the literary structure that provides a ritualistic, imitative, and familiar narrative; neither does she escape the organizing ritualistic mechanism (the banquet) of the Persian enterprise in which she lives and is indeed queen. Both her narrative structure and cultural context are driven by mimetic rivalry and scapegoating—and I hope I have shown that the best way to

²⁷⁸ This is why Esther, and not Mordecai, needed to self-sacrifice (Mordecai was still caught up in the mimetic rivalry with Haman and was an unfit sacrifice.) Esther truly was an *innocent* scapegoat. Girard, though, important to note, does not require scapegoats are innocent—they simply need to fulfill the role of sacrificial victim within his structure.

²⁷⁹ René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 286.

cope with this, according to our narrative, is to *know* how the mechanism works, and maintain control over one's self. Extending Esther's specific predicament to the Jews, neither could they escape from their existence in exile. Perhaps what we have here in the Book of Esther is precisely the revelation of the sacrificial mechanism, how it works, and how best to exist within it until an alternative structure is found.²⁸⁰

Excursus: Esther Caught in the Web of Literary Mimesis

Caught in the web of the cultural mechanism that demands victims, Esther is also caught up in a literary mimesis that seeks violent resolution. The Book of Esther's literary structure may indeed be called mimetic in the sense that it is a series of carefully constructed reversals; the book proceeds according to a clearly peripatetic design. While some have understood its peripety as the work of God behind the scenes or moral just desserts ("measure for measure" retribution), a Girardian might express the peripety in terms of how it exemplifies mimesis. The narrative presents a literary tit-for tat. For example, the edict written by Haman must be countered by an edict written by Mordecai; Vashti's refusal to appear before the king must be countered by Esther's going to the king unbidden; the gallows meant for Mordecai are the gallows for Haman; what would have been the slaughter of the Jews is turned around to be the slaughter of the aggressors upon them; etc.

Fox, in *Character and Ideology*, quotes Robert Alter when he writes:

²⁸⁰ The stark revelation of the mechanism here, and the inability of escape, is in fact reminiscent of Girard's assertion in *I See Satan* that the "good" violence of religion may not necessarily be bad in and of itself. As stated on page 61 of this dissertation, "It is not that the powers are evil in and of themselves; it is that the power claim a false transcendence that makes them evil of satanic." I advocate the same principle with regard to the next chapter in the Book of Esther, in which the Jews are forced to fight to save themselves from their attackers due to the "unchangeable" Persian law. Though Esther and Mordecai do not wish the Jews to fight, they are forced to within the cultural and legal structure in which they exist – a structure that requires blood for reconciliation. This structure, at the same time, enables the Jews to overcome all those who would aggress against them. Thus while the violence cannot be declared "bad" in any absolute sense, it is still a sacrificial structure.

An idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative [is a theme]... The most important structural theme in Esther, one that organizes much of the presentation and wording of events, is the idea that an event intended to harm the Jews eventuates in its opposite. This is the theme of peripety: the result of an action is actually the reverse of what was expected.²⁸¹

This theme is emphasized throughout the narrative through literary mimicking. “Repetition of the vocabulary of the theses in the antitheses is the most distinctive marker of their mirror relationship.”²⁸² Fox provides several examples to illustrate the literary peripety of the book, classifying them as A) Haman’s Authority/Mordecai’s Authority; B) Haman’s Decree/Mordecai’s Decree; C) Counsel of Haman’s Wife and Friends/Despair of Haman’s Wife and Friends; D) Haman’s Pride/Haman’s Disgrace. He marks these reversals as literary mirrors, and they constitute the heart of the narrative between chapters three and eight. Fox acknowledges that the “envelope” (that is, the opening scene in which Vashti is deposed and Esther is made Queen; and the closing battle narrative) also contains reversals, but he claims there are no mirror narratives in these.

Fox asserts that this series of reversals, as the guiding principle of the narrative, is a conscious one. He states that the narrative itself declares it to be so in 9:1:

Now on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, when the king’s word and his law were to be carried out—on the very day when the enemies of the Jews had expected to gain control over them, things would be turned about in that the Jews would gain control over their adversaries.

²⁸¹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 158.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 159.

Fox notes the explicit mention of reversals in these additional biblical verses: 9:22a, which tells how the month “turned from misery to merriment”; and 9:25b, when Mordecai states “let the evil plan that he formed against the Jews recoil back upon his own head.”²⁸³

While Fox notes the structural mimesis of the Esther narrative as a whole, however, he misses the full arc of the mechanism that Girard has identified, and the mimetic need for a victim. While Fox (and also Beal, though toward a different end) recognizes the imitative qualities of the narrative and the characters, this need for a victim, for blood, whether the victim is guilty or innocent, for the purpose of reconciliation, is overlooked. This is, too, why Fox fails to recognize the full import of the envelope to the rest of the narrative. The narrative occurs in phases—discrete incidents of persecution that build in revelatory power, the driving force beneath all of them being mimetic rivalry. Peripety is therefore the engine, but it is not the overarching structure or “guiding principle” of the narrative. The “Proto A” text, for example, would not have been a revelation of the full mechanism because it ends happily and without bloodshed. The violent point of the narrative structure makes the book more controversial precisely because it reveals the sacrificial mechanism in which its characters, the Jews, and indeed the world, are inscribed.

The Purim Vaccine: The Annual Reading and Performance of the Megillah

There is, in fact, the third stage of the persecution text, which until this point has been absent in this portion of the discussion. The third stage, to recall, is the creation of an interdiction or ritual. As I have shown in the previous chapter on the Birkat ha-Banim, the biblical narrative reveals the mechanism (as in the stories of Genesis), and the ritual is how one receives the vaccine and avoids falling prey to the disease of mimetic rivalry.

²⁸³ Ibid., 163.

The Book of Esther itself commands the ritual observance of Purim to commemorate the Jews' freedom from extermination, providing easy evidence that what we have here is, indeed, the third stage of the persecution text. The observance of Purim includes many ritual activities including giving to charity, the Purim banquet, and exchanging gifts. Though not commanded in the book itself, other rituals include fasting, and also more boisterous events including masquerades and *purimschpiels*. Central to the observance of Purim is also that one must hear the reading of the Megillah twice—once by day and once by night. The public reading and hearing of the Megillah has become a cornerstone of Purim observance.²⁸⁴ I will briefly relate some commentary on a few of the rituals here to demonstrate how they have, unfortunately, developed out of a reversion into the sacrificial mentality. I will then focus attention on the hearing of the Megillah, the primary ritual functioning anti-sacrificially, protecting against mimetic desire and scapegoating violence.

In his commentary on Esther, Matthew Fox remarks on the ritual to hear the Megillah:

The public reading of the Scroll is not ordained in the book itself, yet the reading is rooted in the book's ideology. The only festival practice the author envisaged was festivities which replicate the Jews' rejoicing of year 12.²⁸⁵ The Jews of subsequent generations, rather than commemorating something that happened to their ancestors, celebrate their ancestors' *experience*. The holiday has a reflexive, inner-directed quality; the people remember its own experience, and that is accessible only through story, the vehicle of memory.²⁸⁶

One might say that all the Purim rituals have this very purpose: to enable the people to celebrate their ancestors' *experience*. Brevard Childs, comments on

²⁸⁴ Fox details that "The Mishna (tractate Megillah) does not directly command the reading of the Scroll, but rather assumes that is a recognized obligation and proceeds to discuss the details of the practice." Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 152.

²⁸⁵ Meaning the events of chapters 8 and 9 of the Book of Esther.

²⁸⁶ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 152.

the memory as the “heart of Israelite cult and Deuteronomic understanding.”²⁸⁷ Reenacting the past is the way, says Childs, to “form a solidarity with the fathers.”²⁸⁸

Berlin comments on the Purim carnivale and *purimshpiel* to recount how even the violence in the narrative is brought into the experience of Jews on this holiday:

Carnival celebrations, best known from the Greek Dionysia, the Roman Saturnalia, and the English May Day (and in modern times the Mardi Gras, Halloween, and New Year’s Day), often contain elements such as eating, drinking, carousing, masks and disguises, parades and processions, and combat and mock battles. There is an air of wildness, boisterousness, and violence that is made acceptable, perhaps only barely acceptable, because it is done within the bounds of a socially sanctioned festive occasion. Carnival permits the release of one’s urge for violence and revenge in a way that channels the violence so that it is not actually destructive.²⁸⁹

Berlin, in her commentary, emphasizes the nature of the Esther text as comedy, and interprets the text’s violence in the context of Aristotle’s theory of comedy as “cathartic.” What Fox, Childs and Berlin seem to offer in their interpretation of Purim ritual is emotional identification without reflection—somehow presenting ritual as an emotional outlet for catharsis or connection, instead of causing a learning and transcendent experience, i.e. a revelation.²⁹⁰ The idea of catharsis, to recall, is contra how a vaccine in fact operates. A vaccine immunizes against violence toward the eventual transformation of the human system.

Against the above interpretations, I hope I have shown that the Book of Esther does not in fact present a community of Jews that revel in violence; there

²⁸⁷ Brevard Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (IL: Studies in Biblical Theology, 1968), 74.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Berlin, xxi-xxii.

²⁹⁰ Refer back to my discussion of “vaccine” in the introduction.

is no indication that there is a repressed hatred and need for violent retribution in the text.²⁹¹ There is no need for catharsis. The Book of Esther, situated as biblical wisdom literature, appropriately presents the ironic juxtaposition of a value system that declares “to kill one person is as if one has killed the entire world” with a derogatory need to succumb to violence due to one’s exilic existence within a violent cultural context. This is *serious* comedy. The public reading of the Megillah is not a cathartic strategy to let the Jews get violence out of their system; it is meant to help (s)he who is listening *hear* the mimetic workings of world, just as Esther did. This is why one does not just read or listen to the reading of the Megillah. One must *hear* it.

Still, something is “founded” upon the violence of the Book of Esther that is appealing, and which is the cause of the Purim celebrations. Just as violence precedes the founding of Rome, the death of Abel the founding of civilization, and the death of the world in Noah’s flood a new civilization, what is founded here is a temporary peace for the Jews in exile.²⁹² The “victory” of the Jews in the book is not final, (many “Hamans” have arisen throughout history), but at least provides a temporary respite from the world’s rivalry and violence. The strong currents of anti-Semitism present since the days of ancient Judaism are incarnate in the voice of Haman: the Jews live by their own laws; they are separatist; they are a threat. The reality of the Purim miracle for Jews, and the hope of not even salvation, but mere survival, it brings, cannot be underestimated. The cycle of anti-Semitism also continues; and the miracle of being saved is very much due to Esther’s use of the mechanism and

²⁹¹ Some might argue that Esther occurs as “bloodthirsty” when she asks for a second day of fighting in Shushan. I interpret this as part of a mimetic scenario in which the aggressors blindly follow an edict to exterminate a people against all rationality and sense of humanity. In certain strands of interpretation, the Jews will be vulnerable on the second day, just as on the first, should any aggressors remain.

²⁹² Perhaps the mystical schools of Judaism interpreted Haman as the yetzer ha-ra due to their aversion to the explicit violence in the book. The slaughter of Haman became the sacrifice of the evil inclination that would bring on the Days of the Messiah ben David. There is an apocalyptic interpretation that expresses: “this is the last sacrifice that will occur.” It is at first quite odd that there are such divergent figures as Ephraim and Haman representing the yetzer ha-ra. But perhaps there is a logic to it. Whereas Haman is full of sin, Ephraim is pure—an idea correlative with the two goats of Leviticus that are sacrificed on Yom Kippur. This would provide a very interesting avenue for further research.

transference of the target onto Haman. One might recall Girard's assertion in *See Satan* at this juncture: the satanic sacrificial mechanism is not evil in and of itself; the only evil is when this mechanism claims a false transcendence. This "good" violence is of the world as it is presently occurring; for oppressed peoples who can use it to their advantage, it may provide some solace. This "good" violence is not, however, of the divine.

At the same time, Esther is a universal narrative conveying the instability of the scapegoating structure. In *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*, Timothy Beal makes a remarkably Girardian (and chilling) statement:

In Esther, no wholehearted resolve or final solution can be certain...In this sense, even the fairy-tale settlement in chapter 10, at which point Esther disappears while Mordecai rises to be the king's right-hand man, is no more final than the end of chapter 3 depicting Haman and the king drinking together while the city outside the palace walls is thrown into pandemonium...How can this final shoring up ever hold?²⁹³

Reading Esther, as Beale admits, is like reading the Torah-- as soon as one finishes, one is commanded to go right back to the beginning and start over. It is a repetitive cycle that revisits the history of rivalry and violence ad infinitum. Esther must end with violence (as opposed to the "happy" fairy tale ending of Proto-AT) because blood is necessary for a new beginning -- this is the self-propagating way of the world. But in this very context, there are also striking elements of communal identity and peaceful collaborative action that push at the seams of the narrative. The fast of Esther and the Jews slows the narrative down and controls the urge to get irrationally caught up in the crisis. The centered fasting and ritual action in the midst of a death threat is indeed remarkable.

²⁹³ Beal, 121-22.

The reading of the Megillah, then, is a yearly vaccine for this reason: every year one must remember the sacrificial tendency of humanity and the world, and one must deny the false transcendence that this mechanism tries to claim. The vicious violence of the Book of Esther keeps us aware of the terminal disease of violence and, being injected annually, it might even make us sick. The ritual of the *purimschpiel*, as mentioned, is one way humanity has been made sick by the Esther vaccine; these plays which focus on “blotting out the name” of Haman are humanity’s reversion into the sacrificial mindset, celebrating Purim as catharsis, and not as a transformative vaccine. The attempts to “find God” in the narrative over the thousands of years of biblical interpretation is another reversion into the sacrificial. These acts are, unfortunately, founded upon having *misheard* the book. The Purim vaccine, rather, keeps us aware of the separation between sacrificial violence and God; and pushing through this violence is the community that mourns and fasts, that slows down the midst of crisis, but is ultimately (and unfortunately) locked in the grip of its own exile. Thus, though Esther reveals the scapegoating mechanism, even redeems the scapegoat, one is still caught up in its structure. It will be a worldly fight until the vaccine takes hold not just among the Jews, but also among humanity. There are yet to be scapegoats and Hamans until immunity to violence is achieved across the nations.

Without this type of Girardian reading, one is literally and literarily trapped in the vicious mimetic cycle of the book. This entrapment is, I aver, what has bothered commentators back to the times of the Talmud, too. How could one accept the violence at the end of the book – the so-called “immutable” Persian law? This immutable law *is* the scapegoating mechanism of which Girard speaks—that there must be blood to reconcile the conflict. One must read the Megillah and understand the ways of the world, and one is well to be bothered by what it reveals. The commentators’ estimations, in this sense, were quite correct. But at the same time, one must also recognize the parody the book provides of itself. As Girard comments on Shakespeare:

...could not Shakespeare be playing according to the rules of the game at one level and undermining these same rules at another?...Indications abound that in many other plays he is doing precisely that, still providing the crowd with the spectacle they demand while simultaneously writing between the lines, for all those who can read, a devastating critique of that same spectacle."²⁹⁴

Though the story of Purim is one of salvation for the Jews, it is also a criticism of the very mechanism by which this salvation comes. Though a comedy, the violence toward the end of the book reveals that perhaps it is not meant to be thoroughly enjoyable. Whether one reads of the brutal impalement of Haman and his sons, or the unavoidable slaughter of the 75,000, or the irrational threat of genocide—if one is really willing to *hear* the text, it will reveal the fragility of relationships upon which the world is based, and the uncanny laws that are necessary to sustain a fragile peace. Hearing the Megillah has become central to the observance of Purim so that one might be exposed to the mimetic mechanism, understand how it operates, and slowly work within it until the vaccination takes hold and creates immunity. This vaccine is for the Jews, and all humanity.

²⁹⁴ Girard, *Theatre of Envy*, 287.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Third Vaccine: The Reading of Jonah on Yom Kippur

We all tend to blame someone else—the competitors, the press, the changing mood of the marketplace, the government—for our problems. Systems thinking shows us there is no separate “other”; that you and the someone else are part of a single system. The cure lies in your relationship with your ‘enemy.’

--Peter Senghe²⁹⁵

In the previous two chapters, we have discussed two different kinds of “vaccines” against mimetic desire. The first vaccine, the Birkhat ha-Banim, is a ritual designed for the Sabbath, based on a passage at the end of the Book of Genesis, which offers a groundbreaking double blessing on Joseph’s two grandchildren. At the end of the Genesis cycle of sibling competition, rivalry and scapegoating, we find Joseph’s children, Ephraim and Manasseh, blessed, conflict-free, and ready, together with Joseph’s brothers, to found what will become the twelve tribes of Israel. The Birkhat ha-Banim is a peace vaccine, generated from the free and generous inspiration of Jacob, and resulting in the first pair of non-competitive brothers.

Rabbinic midrash, however, adds an interpretive layer to the narrative ritual; the rabbis propose there is a sacrifice of the evil inclination that accompanies the non-violent, anti-sacrificial blessing of the Birkhat ha-Banim.

²⁹⁵ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, (Doubleday: Currency, 1990), 67.

For the rabbis, if one is to avoid rivalry and scapegoating and truly *be like* Ephraim and Manasseh, one must be able to effectively subdue one's yetzer hara. While the midrashic sacrifice of Ephraim as the Messiah ben Joseph may be a later regression into the more literal sacrificial, there are certainly Sabbath prescriptions that aid the subjugation of the evil impulse and support self-control. The reading of the Torah is, in particular, associated with this subjugation. One returns after every cycle to the beginning of the Torah to be reminded of one's duty—to be vaccinated by hearing the narrative dramas of its conflict-driven brothers towards immunity from sibling violence. Human beings are also endowed with an extra soul on the Sabbath, further aiding self-control, but also granting a wholeness of being that is immune to the trap of negative mimesis. While the Torah narratives keep the possibility of negative mimesis fresh in the reader's mind, the Birkhat ha-Banim speaks firmly of a greater future; it vaccinates with the peace of a new order.²⁹⁶

The second vaccine takes place on Purim and involves the reading of the Book of Esther—familiarily called the *Megillah*. Esther presents a series of what we have distinguished as 'persecution texts' that subtly reveal the dynamics of mimetic desire and Girard's scapegoat mechanism, deterring us from its violence while confirming that the scapegoat mechanism is, for now, the 'immutable law' of human social interaction. Commanded to read the entire Book of Esther on the holy day of Purim, one reads about being trapped in a violent cycle—even Esther had to succumb to its violence or have her people exterminated; but its message is to understand how to live in exile and use the means at one's disposal to sustain what can only be temporary and fragile states of peace. Within the human realm, Esther's message seems to be that there is no full alternative yet available. Thus we can receive the Esther vaccine to protect ourselves against the mechanism, and slowly build prevention and immunity through exposure. While Esther contains very slight glimmers of anti-sacrificial

²⁹⁶ This statement is not to overlook the fact that Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, etc. all reconcile within the book of Genesis. Their examples involve a learning process while the case of Ephraim and Manasseh are conflict-free from the start, presenting the idea that a new future is already in motion.

action, the book as a whole does not contain enough peace antigens to inject us with the biological memory of a new order.

The earthy and perhaps uncomfortable message of the Book of Esther is eclipsed by the book that receives center stage during the highest Holy Day of the Jews—that is, the reading of the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur. Whereas Esther reveals the inner workings of the Girardian mechanism but leaves us without an immediate alternative – (escaping victimage only through a ritualizing of the mechanism itself, and reliant upon a potentially very long series of inoculations before immunity to such violence develops) – the Book of Jonah takes the reader out of the vicious cycle of competition and retribution through a stunning act of mercy and forgiveness.²⁹⁷ A rabbinic midrash in fact adds a sentence to the end of the Book of Jonah: “Conduct your world according to the attribute of mercy!”²⁹⁸ Whereas in Esther we have a seemingly unabashed use of the mechanism for personal and communal ends, in Jonah we have a model that actively avoids violence and scapegoating. As with the Book of Esther, too, the Book of Jonah is by no means unequivocal. There are many questions that loom in interpreting the text—questions such as: who is Jonah?; what does it mean that he flees from God?; why did he flee from his commission as a prophet?; how are we to understand the immediate and exaggerated repentance of the Ninevites?; has Jonah learned anything by the end of the book?; what is the book’s connection to the Yom Kippur liturgy?; etc. In her work *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, author Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes, “The book of Jonah invites interpretation from the first verse to

²⁹⁷ The Book of Esther, indeed, is about the physical realm in which scapegoating persists despite our best efforts. The Vilna Gaon, a reputable rabbi who lived in the 18th century in Lithuania, remarked on the inclusion of the name Purim in Yom Kippur-im, “a day *like* Purim.” Rabbinic literature also attests to these two days as ones that will persist in the World to Come. The relationship is based on the idea that Yom Kippur is focused on spiritual pursuits while Purim is focused on physical pursuits. Purim, for example, recounts a physical death sentence for the Jews that is miraculously turned around; and Yom Kippur may likewise seem as such. Because all human beings fall prey to sinning (“missing the mark”), it seems no one would be able to escape God’s judgment on judgment day. And yet one can. Purim deals with physical salvation, Yom Kippur with spiritual salvation.

²⁹⁸ From *Midrash Jonah*, ed. Jellinek, p. 102, quoted in U. Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999) introduction to commentary, 12.

the last; but its elusive meanings are never fully netted. There is no conclusive answer to its questions."²⁹⁹

Despite the innumerable possibilities of interpretations that can be made when studying the Book of Jonah, this text, like Esther and our Genesis narrative, demonstrate ideas that may be distinguished by looking through a Girardian lens. Ephraim and Manasseh exerted self-control and avoided the trappings of sibling conflict; Jacob blessed in the spirit of proactive creation; Esther demonstrated impeccable self-restraint in her ritualistic and carefully strategized unveiling of Haman's scheme; and the Book of Jonah also reveals a self-control and a profound freedom that illustrates what, indeed, positive mimesis may look like. Below, therefore, I will address how the text of Jonah and its corresponding ritual activities of Yom Kippur constitute our third vaccine.

History of Interpretation

One might typically include a few words on translation and the history of interpretation in a chapter on any book of the Bible. This was, indeed, a necessary topic to cover in dealing with the Book of Esther, which has a very complicated interpretive history. Esther existed in many versions, and the differences between them were significant—in particular the differences between the Masoretic text (asserting the immutability of Persian law leading to the genocidal violence at the end of the book) and what Fox called the "Proto-AT" (the version with the simplistic fairy tale ending) in which justice reigned down on Haman and everyone lived "happily ever after." To recall, my insight in light of these two versions of Esther was that the Masoretic text canonized the violent version of Esther precisely to reveal the workings of what Girard distinguished as the scapegoat mechanism. The Masoretic version declares that the

²⁹⁹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2009), 83.

scapegoating mechanism is the unavoidable, immutable structure of the physical realm.

The Book of Jonah does not have such an elaborate and difficult interpretive history, but a few main questions have been debated over the years. One of these questions has been the question of its “authenticity”—that is, whether the book can be called historical.³⁰⁰ It does seem against the odds that the rather extravagant happenings of Jonah would allow the book to be cast as history. In one sense, the narrative may be understood to be an elaborate sequence of miracles: the sea calmed once Jonah is thrown overboard; Jonah being swallowed and then regurgitated by a fish; his psalm while in the fish’s belly; the five word foreign language prophecy to the Ninevites; the immediate conversion of the whole city; the tree that grew in one night and was then hollowed by a worm; etc.³⁰¹ Despite these supernatural happenings, attempts have been made to prove Jonah’s historical character as recently as 1956 (in the Catholic Encyclopedia) and 1962 (in Protestant dictionaries), attempts inspired perhaps by the use of certain seemingly “historical” data within the narrative. Jonah, for example, is introduced as “Jonah the son of Amittai” in 1.1—a name coming directly from 2 Kings 14.25, which states: “Jeroboam II restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath unto the sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke through his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-Hapher.” A second historical reference in Jonah is to “Nineveh, that *great* city” (Jon. 1.2) – a reference implying Nineveh at the height of its power as the capitol of Assyria.

While it seems useful to have these external reference points to situate and perhaps date the text of Jonah,³⁰² we encounter the issue that the servant

³⁰⁰ Andrew Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* (SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 8.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Though there is no conclusive evidence to date the composition with certainty, most scholars will date Jonah to the post-exilic period using standard tools for biblical analysis such as genre (and whether it contains “historical” accuracy); the nature of the text as a unified composition or composite; comparison and evidence of adopting from earlier or

Jonah son of Amittai, who operated under King Jeroboam II, did not overlap with Nineveh in its prime (i.e. a city “three days wide”). To be more specific, the reign of Jeroboam II lasted from 786-746 BCE; yet Nineveh did not grow into a large city, eventually becoming the capitol of Assyria, until the reign of Sennacherib between 705 and 681 BCE, over 40 years later. After the reign of Sennacherib, Nineveh remains the Assyrian capitol until it is destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE; and the Babylonians, in turn, destroy Jerusalem in 587 BCE, exiling the Judeans from the land to which they were not to return until 539 BCE.³⁰³ Given the lack of historical congruence between the reign of Jeroboam and his servant Jonah with the eminence of Nineveh, Lacocque and Lacocque lobby against attempts at Jonah’s historical “authenticity” and, following James D. Smart, maintain that the only real option is to deem the book fiction.³⁰⁴ The historical “facts” give the allusion of history to an otherwise fictional narrative.³⁰⁵

Coming to terms with what Jonah is not, we still must declare what it is. And this is the second main question pervading the book’s interpretation history. Fortunately, most scholars, including Smart, Bickerman,³⁰⁶ and Cary, will deem

contemporaneous literature; linguistic comparisons; and social and theological arguments. A comprehensive analysis of these features can be found in Sasson’s Anchor Bible Commentary on Jonah. Sasson’s conclusion is to date the final redaction of Jonah to possibly the exilic, but more likely the post-exilic period. See Jack M. Sasson, *The Book of Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (NY: Doubleday; The Anchor Bible, 1990), 27. Scholar Phillip Cary dates Jonah with more certainty than Sasson, also to the post-exilic period. See also Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 36. I am hopeful that examining Jonah through a Girardian lens may yield how the scapegoat mechanism was fully disclosed in this post-exilic period through our contemporaneous examples of Esther and Jonah.

³⁰³ Cary suggests the following book for a complete history of this period in his text on page 35: *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3.2: *The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.*, ed. John Boardman et al.; 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.)

³⁰⁴ James D. Smart, *Jonah: Introduction and Exegesis*, The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956).

³⁰⁵ There are other telltale clues that the book is not historical including, for example, the title “king of Nineveh,” which is a title uniquely used in the book of Jonah. The only king of Nineveh we hear about in scripture is the Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib, who was called “the great king, king of Assyria.” We do not know who the king in the book of Jonah is—we are not told his name, lineage, wars, etc. We might consider this king, then, as one who presents a model for what a king could do if faced with such a situation. Cary puts it this way: “The book of Jonah tacitly invites us to compare him [Sennacherib] with this anonymous king of Nineveh and ask: Which one of these two behaves like a true king?” See Cary, 113.

³⁰⁶ E.J. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* (NY: Schocken Books, 1967).

the book of Jonah a type of parable. They will also, however, disagree on its ultimate point.³⁰⁷

Smart, for instance, declares the aim of Jonah to be a post-exilic diatribe to undercut hostility expressed toward non-Jews in Israel. For Smart, Jonah's absurd, sulky, and juvenile character is denouncing one who would reject God because of God's mercy. As Segal affirms: "Jonah himself, in his shortsighted determination to avert the rescue of Nineveh, does not come across in a very favorable light."³⁰⁸ It is often this depiction of Jonah that emerges within the context of the universalistic interpretations of the book as well, declaring Yahweh as the God of all the nations, and not just of Israel. One might say that Smart follows the trajectory of the early rabbis who put forth a universalistic interpretation of Jonah as expressed in the Talmud, particularly in the Bavli, and perhaps less so in the Yerushalmi, which tends to take a more particularist view. This universalism finds popular expression in many Yom Kippur services today, alongside or sometimes in place of the more particularist interpretations as I will explain below.

An emphasis on Jonah's universalism has often been the interpretation endorsed by the church as well, which has unfortunately had the counter-productive effect of fueling the opinion of Jews as a narrow-minded, stubborn, and ultimately self-concerned people. The book of Jonah has been used as fuel for anti-Semitism since the days of the early church. Segal relates a story about Saint Ephrem's (who dies 373 CE) charged use of Jonah:

³⁰⁷ The interpretation of Jonah as a parable is just one of several possibilities, though, and the interpretive lens I will use following. One viable (Zohar-inspired) alternative is presented by Rachel Adelman, who views Jonah as a Messianic figure, in her paper, "Jonah through the Looking Glass: Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer's Portrait of an Apocalyptic Prophet," (paper presented at the WCJS Conference, August 2009), accessed September 16, 2012, http://www.jewish-studies.org/.upload/Adelman_Rachel_%282%29.pdf.

³⁰⁸ Eliezer Segal, "The Repentance of Nineveh," accessed September 16, 2012, http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/950921_Jonah.html.

In a possible reaction to the strong influence of Jewish practices and ideas in the Syrian Church, [Christian writer] Efrem [the Syrian] did not pass up this opportunity to berate the Jews for their reliance on the merits of their forefathers, and for valuing the Law more than the God who gave it. Efrem concluded his account by having the people of Nineveh praise God "for humiliating the Jews by means of the gentiles."³⁰⁹

Further Christian commentaries relate the kindness the Ninevites extend to Jonah, only to be met by Jonah's utter embarrassment at the unrighteousness of his own people.³¹⁰

Bickerman follows a different trend in ancient rabbinic interpretations of Jonah that have been put forth mainly in the Yerushalmi. A trend of the Yerushalmi is in seeing Jonah not as a miserable and resistant prophet, but rather as a staunch "Friend of Israel" who knows that Nineveh will someday soon prove to be Israel's archenemy.³¹¹ Thus Jonah is unwilling to betray his own people to preach repentance to Nineveh. (A popular comment on Jonah is to say, "he chose the son, not the father.") Jonah, in this nationalistic interpretation, is shown to be in strong solidarity with his people, willing even to die in the sea to save them. The *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, a later treatise, also depicts Jonah as a fierce defender of Israel, believing that any prophecy not delivered onto Nineveh will come back and be visited upon his own people.³¹² Saint Jerome put forth this opinion as well: the prophet knew that "the repentance of the Gentiles would be the downfall of the Jews."³¹³ Phyllis Trible, in her book on Jonah called *Rhetorical Criticism*, states that this is the interpretation of Jonah most typically presented in the synagogue on Yom Kippur.³¹⁴

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Adelman, 7.

³¹³ Lacocque and Lacocque, 9.

³¹⁴ Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*, ed. Gene M. Tucker (Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

Both Smart and Bickerman, following strands in early rabbinic and Christian tradition (and harmonizing with certain later traditions as well), provide insight into the interpretations of Jonah as a parable that justifies one religious tradition over another—and one set of religious persons over another. On one hand, the Jews are denounced for denying the love and mercy of God toward Gentiles; on the other hand, Jews are seen as simply protecting themselves against their future destruction. The extension of mercy and forgiveness to Gentiles that occurs in the book of Jonah is compounded by the identification of the Gentile recipients of God's compassion as the Ninevites, the nation that will destroy the northern kingdom of Israel within about 50 years of being acquitted by Yahweh. Contextualizing the subject matter of the book in this traumatic history makes a reconciling interpretation tricky.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, the ambiguity of the biblical text leaves room for many interpretations. It is the rabbinic (and here also early Christian) commentary on the biblical text that tends to polarize. The Bavli typically upholds the universalistic interpretation of Jonah as a source revealing God's message of universal repentance and forgiveness, endorsing Nineveh as a model to be studied and emulated. Many strands in the Yerushalmi contrarily demonize Nineveh, declaring their repentance as superficial. Segal explains:

These texts [i.e., the texts of the Yerushalmi] accuse the people of Nineveh of staging an elaborate deception, of feigning their repentance, and even of impudently threatening to cause suffering to innocent beasts unless God will agree to exercise compassion.

As for the people's declaration "Let every one turn from his evil way and from the iniquity which is in his hands," the midrashic sources read this in a narrowly legalistic manner: Only those ill-gotten items that were *literally* in their hands at the time did they agree to restore—but articles that were kept in chests and coffers were excluded from the commitment.³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Segal, "The Repentance of Nineveh."

This dichotomization is typical given the cultural context of the development of Christian and Jewish ideologies and identities not only in distinction from each other, but also against other, external, pagan challenges. The Book of Jonah, like the Book of Esther, provides easy fuel for inter-religious criticism, and was used as a polemical work both against Jews, and by Jews. The mimetic rivalry over the holy land, and which community was the *real* chosen one, was also a subtext for how a book like Jonah was interpreted.

Significantly, both these types of interpretations are apologetic in nature, in the true sense of being defensive of a faith over and against another. The Yerushalmi's defense of Judaism from external threats, and in the aftermath of a long history of displacement, is understandable, and is often a popular view still today (given the continued history of displacement). The Palestinian rabbinic distrust of the Ninevites is understandable in the context of history. This strand of interpretation is nationalistic (or particularist) and must be considered as an expression of the fight for survival similar to what we have in Esther, and the Birkhat ha-Banim's affirmation of Jewish identity in Egypt. But neither this interpretation nor the Christian interpretation that claims religious superiority actually deals with the relationship *between* the Jews and Gentiles, preferring instead to maintain interpretations that fuel a mimetic rivalry between them.

Phillip Cary, in his book simply titled *Jonah*, presents an interpretation of the book that speaks more to its meta-language and structure rather than providing a defense of one people over another, echoing the more universalistic type of interpretation we have also seen in previous chapters. Cary sums up his position as follows:

The book of Jonah is not a historical report about the activity of the prophet in the time of Jeroboam II but a parable written for returning Judean exiles about what might have been—and indeed about what could still happen, depending on how the original readers, the Judeans coming back to their homeland in the sixth century, handle their equivalent of Jonah's situation at the end of the book...For what the book of Jonah aims to get us thinking about is the

situation faced by the Judeans with respect to Babylon, the capital of the empire that swallowed up Judah, as it is illuminated by the situation of Jonah with respect to Nineveh, the capital of the empire that swallowed up Israel.³¹⁶

Jonah, for Cary, represents a *situation* that is repeated ongoing in history—a cycle, if you will—which is by nature repetitive, and will be very dangerous if not managed properly. Cary points to a repetitious history, which includes traumas of war, destruction and exile—the very lives of people are at stake in how these relationships between the nations are managed. For Cary, the parable inquires into precisely this: how Jonah (and in turn the Israelites) handled their relationship to Nineveh before their defeat by Nineveh’s hands. The parable indirectly asks also: how might the Hebrews have related to Babylon before their own defeat and exile? Jonah, like Esther, may reveal something surprising and counter-cultural about how to manage inter-group relations and rivalry.

Lacocque and Lacocque, with J.D. Crossan, go so far as to call Jonah a *subversive* parable, specifically “a story subverting the world”³¹⁷ and reversing “mythic expectations.”³¹⁸ Roland Barthes elaborates on this idea when he says, “readers want a text that is ‘readable’...a text that does not disturb them in their habits...in order to be comfortable, the hoped-for text must confirm the options of the past and the projects for the future of the reader.”³¹⁹ As Jonah himself is disturbed in his text, his text also disturbs the reader on many levels. It is certainly not comfortable. The text forces one to confront the very task of bringing redemption to one’s enemies-- one might compare Jonah’s going to Nineveh in the 8th century BCE to a Jew’s going to Berlin in the 1930’s—would one have the courage to carry out such a seemingly insane mission? The text

³¹⁶ Cary, 36.

³¹⁷ Lacocque and Lacocque, 19, 27.

³¹⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (OR: Polebridge Press, 1994), xii.

³¹⁹ Lacocque, and Lacocque, 27.

challenges the reader to think about whether we, too, might flee as Jonah did. It also confronts us with the question will we be saved or will we perish?

But it is not just this question that is disturbing—it is in how one must change in order to avoid perishing that is so penetrating.

[The Ninevites] deserve one thing: total destruction within forty days. The only redeeming factor is not their superior culture, their philosophical humanism, or their religious tolerance, but their capacity to repent, that is, in fact, to *stop being what they used to be*.³²⁰

Paul Ricoeur distinguishes the main characteristic of narrative as that which disorients and reorients our imaginations. The reorientation “constitutes a real breakthrough in the circularity of our existence because the message, heard in reality for the first time, indicates a direction, an orientation, to our life movement.”³²¹ Jonah certainly presents a text that is not what one would expect, especially in its portrait of an acquiescent and submitting “evil” that fulfills the demands the Israelites so failed to fulfill in the earlier prophets. The Ninevites, indeed, showed a personally confronting lack of resistance in their immediate turn around. And this is disorienting, to use Ricoeur’s term. It is also, following Ricoeur, reorienting in that it shows a possibility inside of a situation in which we had previously seen none. Sodom and Gemorrah were not saved despite Abraham’s pleas. What the reader expects here is radically overturned by a new possibility—and there is a full-blown shift necessary to bring this possibility into being.

The lack of historical congruity in Jonah, then, bolsters the idea that there is something different to get out of this book; not an historical prophet, Jonah has a trans-historical message to convey. There is something more structural, and

³²⁰ Ibid., 44.

³²¹ Paul Ricoeur as quoted in Lacocque and Lacocque, 26.

also more personal, to get out of this book, which seems, in light of this portion of its interpretive history, to be intricately related to inter-group relations and rivalries. The interpretations of Jonah, however, both in certain rabbinic circles and otherwise, fall short of this kind of analysis; they have typically been one-sided, focusing on either a defense of Jonah or a denigration of him, instead of looking at his role within the structural processes Girard defines as mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. Below, it is my hope that a fundamental message of Jonah will be revealed through a look at the book through the Girardian lens.

Coming back to now to the textual history of Jonah, the translation of Jonah over time is, compared to the book of Esther, relatively uncomplicated. The vocalized text of the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, for example, which dates to about 1008/1010 CE proves nearly identical in terms of consonants to the Jonah scroll found at Qumran dating from approximately 1000 years earlier. Sasson, the author of the Anchor Bible commentary on Jonah, asserts that:

The discovery, therefore, nicely attests to a relatively stable transmission of Jonah, at least since the destruction of the Second Temple. Occasionally, however, copyists continue to enter divergences (mostly in vowels) down to the present era, and these too prove not to be significant.³²²

Similarly, Phyllis Tribble, who wrote what is typically considered the authoritative analysis of the linguistics of the Book of Jonah, states of the Septuagint translation that: “the LXX of *Jonah* is a faithful translation of its Hebrew *Vorlage* (our *Textus Receptus*).”³²³ Even Jerome, who translated the Jonah text into

³²² Jack M. Sasson, *The Book of Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (NY: Doubleday; The Anchor Bible, 1990), 10.

³²³ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 98.

Latin around 400 CE—and for a Christian audience-- interprets the Hebrew along the lines of what we now have as the Masoretic text.³²⁴

There is one translation of the book of Jonah, however, that is deemed of special importance for this study—and this is the Aramaic translation known as the *targum* to Jonah.³²⁵ Like the targum to Esther, the targum to Jonah was in part concerned with removing language that could be interpreted as “Christian,” as Jews were distinguishing themselves from the Christians during this formative era. The primary function of the *targumim* in general, however, was didactic, and Jonah’s targum in particular “was to teach that God’s forgiveness is extended to whoever abandons evil.”³²⁶

According to Etan Levine, who wrote a comprehensive study of Targum Jonah, it seems Jonah was not only used liturgically for the Day of Atonement ceremony, but also served as a general didactic vehicle read during times of crisis, which may explain its early translation into what was becoming the common language. “The book of Jonah was quoted during public fasts imposed on the community during periods of prolonged drought, impending attack, earthquake, pestilence and other communal dangers regarded as punishments for disobeying God’s word.”³²⁷ According to Levine, the earliest usage of Jonah was not, in fact, tied to Yom Kippur, but was a more general remedy to

³²⁴ Sasson, 10.

³²⁵ The targum to Jonah (and in fact, the *targumim* of all the prophets) is attributed to Jonathan ben Uzziel, who was a disciple of Hillel the Elder in the first century CE in Palestine. These *targumim* constitute translations of the scriptures into the common spoken language of the time, making them accessible, according to rabbinic legend, “to mortal man.” Aramaisms in the biblical texts provide evidence of the gradual erosion of Hebrew as the common language, and thus *targumim* were provided in much the same way the Septuagint provided a translation for Greek-speaking Jews. What therefore becomes apparent in the targum to Jonah is where the Aramaic emphasizes aspects of the text, revealing what the ancient translator was emphasizing for didactic purposes. Therefore, along with this stable and fairly uncontroversial interpretive history, most analysis below will be based on the Masoretic text, and I will include information from the targum to Jonah where it might serve to emphasize how its message was understood. For detailed information on the Targum to Jonah in particular, see Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Jonah* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1975), 7-9.

³²⁶ Levine, 8.

³²⁷ TB *Rosh Hashanah* 16B et TB *Taanit*, *passim*, quoted in Levine, 8. The TB *Taanit* contains an extensive list of how to determine if there is a communal crisis and what to do about it.

communal crisis. This early liturgical use of Jonah supports its supra-historical quality as a book that deals with something more innate and structural rather than a specific historic event. For example, Jonah has something to say about how individuals and communities respond to crisis.

The import of Jonah to Girardian studies becomes apparent in Jonah's earliest, and indeed its ongoing usage. Jonah, as I will demonstrate, has a liturgical usage and a literary content that support, perhaps more emphatically than any of the texts already included in this dissertation, the reigning in and control of mimetic impulses, a break from the dominant sacrificial and violent structure, and a message about intergroup relations. To demonstrate this most effectively, I will continue below with an exegesis of the text of Jonah. Then I will bring the discussion back around to the liturgical reading of Jonah and how this constitutes the third vaccine against mimetic rivalry.

The Book of Jonah in Two Parts

The Book of Jonah may very conveniently be broken up into two distinct parts. The first part of the Book of Jonah constitutes chapters 1 and 2. These chapters recount: the calling of Jonah by God (1.1-2); Jonah's fleeing the call by booking passage to Tarshish (1.3); his experience on board the vessel (1.4-14); and the sailors' casting him (unwillingly) into the sea to save their lives (1.15-16) at which point Jonah is swallowed by the great fish (2). The second part of Jonah constitutes chapters 3 and 4. In these chapters, God once again calls Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh (3.1-2); Jonah fulfills his mission (3.3-4); Nineveh repents (3.5-10); and Jonah sits frustrated outside the city (4).

According to Cary, who is a Christian theologian, "Jonah is a blessing to the Gentiles despite himself" in both halves of the book.³²⁸ Jonah is the only Israelite in the story and, to Cary, it is because of him that everyone else is saved

³²⁸ Cary, 20.

by God: “a boatload of Gentiles in the first half, and the great city of Nineveh in the second half.”³²⁹ Cary asserts that there are distinct differences between the two halves of the Jonah story, though, and the key to interpreting the narrative is in distinguishing these differences.³³⁰ For Cary, the differences are to be found in how the characters, including Jonah, relate to God. He asserts that the first half of the book “goes better” than the second half in that the sailors know the name of God (YHWH) and worship Him, whereas the Ninevites only come to know God very generally as Elohim.³³¹ Cary also asserts that Jonah’s position is clear and his life is saved at the end of the first half of the book (by the fish), while he remains in limbo as to his position at the end of the second half.

One might say that Cary, with this exegesis, supports a “sacrificial” interpretation of the book of Jonah. He resonates more fully with the first half of the book because it illustrates the familiar sacrificial and scapegoating structure—a structure that “goes better” only in the sense that there is closure, that is, the death of a scapegoat and the subsequent salvation for the community of sailors. All the while, however, the sailors are resisting this seemingly inevitable end for Jonah. It does not really seem to “go well” for the sailors who are conscious of the blood they are being required to shed, even if, in the end, they are not punished for it. Although, granted, the sacrifice the sailors finally make of Jonah makes for a tidy narrative and a storyline with a distinct, God-centered ending.

I bring Cary’s analysis in here to demonstrate how a Girardian reading will actually reverse Cary’s conclusions, making the *anti-sacrificial* nature of Jonah clear, as well as Jonah’s struggle (and perhaps the readers’ struggle) with this very message. The sailors’ *consciousness* of Jonah as a victim is the first step to the fully mature narrative of the second half, which becomes overtly anti-sacrificial; and in the second half of the book, there is no scapegoat-- the would-

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ The interchanging names of God in the Book of Jonah is a theme in its interpretive history, with no solid conclusions as to its significance. Cary *does* provide analytical insight of import with regard to the use of the names of God here, though I disagree with his conclusions.

be animal sacrifices do not become objectified ritual victims, but are instead dressed up and “humanized” in mourning garb. Cary’s analysis, based on a sacrificial theology, misses the import of the text as a self-conscious revelation of the mechanism, and a polemic *against* sacrifice in which even the animals mourn (and indeed celebrate) the death of the sacrificial system.

Before moving forward with this analysis, it must be clarified that there are two types of “sacrifice” occurring in the Book of Jonah, and each is a certain type of vaccine. The sailors, for example, perform two successive, *literal* sacrifices: first, they throw Jonah overboard; second, they make burnt offerings. The sailors perform the type of sacrifice standardly associated with “pagan” religious ritual that uses a controlled dose of violence to prevent contagion, and creates a violent sacred out of the result. The structural meta-narrative of the text, however, will be shown to reveal this as a religious “lie,” turning what the sailors do into an *anti-sacrificial sacrifice*; that is, the text is a revelatory vaccine to expose us to the violent mechanism of sacrifice, and serve as a polemic against it. Bringing Girard to bear, it seems irrefutable that the first half of the Book of Jonah consciously constructs a scapegoating incident that is anti-sacrificial, and anti-violent. Unfortunately, Jonah’s resistance to change puts the sailors in the position of believing they have to expel him, and they interestingly make the necessary theological adjustments. Thus, part one reveals how a lack of repentance (and responsibility) makes scapegoating necessary (even if undesired), also leading to a violent sacred. This vaccine is of the same ilk as the vaccine we have in Esther; it vaccinates with exposure to violence (while sustaining a critique thereof).

The second kind of sacrifice brings Jonah beyond the territory of Esther, and offers a new possibility. This second kind of sacrifice is the spiritual sacrifice of a mentality, and it is a transformation more than revelation. This second kind of sacrifice is, if you will, the sacrifice of the “sacrificial mentality” itself; it is the release of the “pagan” structure that causes the cycle of violence to persist. In this way, this “good” sacrifice is also, ironically, *anti-sacrificial*. For cross-

reference, it may be considered akin to the sacrifice of the Messiah ben Joseph, symbolic of the yetzer ha-ra, explained in chapter two; the destruction of the evil inclination is the move into the anti-sacrificial. The Ninevites are the exemplars of this second type of sacrifice in Jonah. Though Jonah himself is challenged with this kind of transformation, it is the Ninevites who do what Jonah could not. The anti-sacrificial repentance of the Ninevites is therefore put forth in the book as one of our “peace vaccines,” a model to be followed that transcends the vicious cycle of human violence, and effectively removes the projection of violence onto the deity. This vaccine is meant to produce a contagious “mimetic of blessing,” too—a model for the community to imitate, and also a model for the relationship between humans and their god. Let us now look at how the varied sacrifices of the Book of Jonah constitute a vaccine against negative mimetic desire as well as a vaccine for mimetic peace in more detail.

Part I (A): Jonah’s Expulsion by the Sailors: Active Resistance to Scapegoating

The first few verses of Jonah tell of Jonah’s call from God to prophesy and “declare doom” upon the wicked Ninevites. After receiving this call, Jonah finds and boards a ship headed toward Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction from where he was commanded by God to go. While the biblical text remains ambiguous about Jonah’s reasons for fleeing his call, rabbinic commentaries seem to agree overall that the primary reason for Jonah’s flight was due to his understanding that Nineveh, which was the central city of the Assyrian empire, would eventually defeat Israel.³³² According to the rabbis, (both the Bavli and Yerushalmi rabbis generally agree³³³), Jonah knew that God would forgive Nineveh after Jonah’s prophecy was given, and so Jonah wanted to avoid

³³² This historical foreknowledge on Jonah’s part makes perfect sense in the context of Jonah as a post-exilic parable or folktale.

³³³ This explanation as to why Jonah fled is sustained in both the more universalistic and particularist strands of rabbinic exegesis.

“saving” Nineveh in effect to “save” his own Israel. Jonah admits later in the narrative, for example, that he knew of “God’s abounding mercy”, and could not bring himself to go against his own sense of justice by prophesying and bringing forgiveness to Nineveh. The rabbinic interpretation of this initial scene, especially when brought into the context of the Yerushalmi’s denigration of Nineveh, is in alignment with the rabbinic interpretations that tend to polarize Israel and “the nations,” embodying a reversion into the sacrificial. Whether Jonah (or the author) knew of Israel’s eventual demise because of Nineveh is unclear in the text, and may be irrelevant to understanding why Jonah fled. On an emotional level, the demand upon Jonah to step into the land of Israel’s long-time adversary might, truly, have been frightening, terrifying, so much so that Jonah would, indeed, rather have died. This alone, without knowing the future, would have been enough reason to run in the other direction.³³⁴ But no matter what the real reason for Jonah’s action, the text is clear to inform the reader that Jonah is in avoidance of his call, and that this will be the cause of the problems brought forth in the next part of the narrative.

Only four verses into the narrative, there is what one might call a mimetic crisis: “The Lord hurled such furious winds toward the sea that a powerful storm raged upon it; the ship expected itself to crack up. Terrified, the sailors appealed, each to his own god(s), and, to lighten their load, they flung their equipment overboard” (Jonah 1.4-5a). According to Girard, and as explored in the previous section on Esther, natural crises are standard causes for creating a breakdown in society and feelings of social disorder—a level of *sameness* occurs when a community is faced with survival-- rivalries snowball and violence brews. We do see a certain sameness here in the case of the sailors, too—each of them is appealing to their personal divinity, and working to lighten the load of the ship to prevent what seems like imminent disaster. Remarkably, the sailors do not,

³³⁴ Other interpretations attribute Jonah’s avoidance to a fear of humiliation at his prophecy not coming true (he is afraid of being deemed a false prophet.) Jonah had reason to feel this way, too. Jonah’s task (before this one) was to warn Jeroboam II, Jehu’s successor, to mend his ways or be punished. To Jonah’s surprise, Jeroboam did mend his ways, and was not punished, and this angered Jonah because he felt that it made him look bad and that people would no longer believe his prophecy.

however, demonstrate the chaotic “all-against-all” response to the crisis; rather, the sailors are working in an orderly fashion, each making an effort toward their survival.

Jonah, contrary to the sailors’ efforts, had “descended into the vessel’s hold” and fallen into a “trance.” Though the author provides no information as to why Jonah dissociated himself and glazed over, one might guess that Jonah was struggling deeply with the trouble he was causing for others. He must have felt caught up in an impossible situation—avoiding the divine call was putting others at risk, and he was horrified—frozen like a deer in the headlights.

What is truly remarkable about the remainder of this chapter, though, is in how the sailors treat Jonah despite his culpability, and in the midst of the crisis. The next few verses read:

The captain came and said to him [Jonah], “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous (Jonah 1.6-8, 11).

One might imagine that a crisis such as this, one in which death lurks close by, might bring a more intense chastisement upon Jonah who is found “sleeping” in the hold. Further, Jonah is discovered to be the one guilty of causing the crisis! Despite this context in which any mistreatment of Jonah by the sailors might be understandable (even if unacceptable), the sailors demonstrate the same calm

as certain military Special Forces operatives.³³⁵ As Sasson puts it, “formalities triumph over terror.”³³⁶ Sasson remarks on the sailors’ response as follows:

By casting lots, the sailors eventually discover that Jonah is the cause of their troubles. That in the midst of a tempest they would politely pose a series of questions (not all of which can be of immediate benefit to them) obviously retards the tale’s thrust; that the sailors would ask Jonah, the designated guilty party, to instruct them on the way to behave, certainly tests our credulity.³³⁷

Sasson’s words reveal how he thinks *most* people would respond in such a situation—that is, the pinpointing of a guilty party in the midst of crisis would likely not be the venue for a polite interrogation. Sasson may implicitly share Girard’s own viewpoint here: under stress of crisis, humans fall prey to mimetic rivalry, irrational “herd” mentality, and violence. And conflicts around the world will support this conclusion. But this is not the situation we have in Jonah. Contrary to what Girard has shown as the irrational mimetic snowballing that takes root in crisis (as I discussed in the opening chapter through *The Bacchae* and the *Myth of Apollonius*), the sailors’ response is surprisingly calm, diplomatic and forgiving. They provide, in fact, a lesson in what I might call “how *not* to get caught up in a mimetic crisis” and “how *not* to fall unconsciously into violent scapegoating.”

There are a few distinct ways that the sailors demonstrate their ability to stay in control. First, it is important to reiterate how the sailors worked in an orderly fashion, each sacrificing to their god and each unloading the ship’s contents, in response to the storm. The narrative does not mention interreligious tension or competitiveness; they work together as a team with a common

³³⁵ Yale psychiatrist Andy Morgan, for example, has been conducting studies of Special Forces recruits to test their responses to extremely stressful situations. Many of the recruits, despite being put into situations simulating tortures and enemy capture, maintain extraordinary calm and mental clarity. Retrieved on October 11, 2012. <http://www.futurepundit.com/archives/007953.html>.

³³⁶ Sasson, 341.

³³⁷ Ibid.

purpose. Once Jonah is found, the sailors simply and directly enjoin him to do his part. Then, as Jonah is shown to be guilty by lots, the sailors demonstrate their ability to *stay* calm and in control by asking questions. Sasson calls this “retarding the tale’s thrust.” It is as if the narrative, in the midst of a tumultuous storm and the exposure of a criminal, decides to step back and take a deep breath.

This slowing down is reminiscent of how the author of Esther also slows the pace down before having Esther respond to Haman’s threat. Esther, significantly, fasts and prays, calling her community to do so as well, before making her first contact with the King. Esther also takes time in the midst of a crisis to think rationally about how best to proceed. The sailors do as Esther did; they remain calm and in control, posing questions as Esther took time to breathe through fasts and banquets.

But this episode is also remarkably different from what we have in Esther. Sasson names what the sailors of Jonah do in this scene as “formalities.” While Esther certainly engages in formalities, ritualizing the process of scapegoating through banquets, she carefully refrains from including Haman in the solution to the crisis. Indeed, the intense mimetic rivalry of Haman with the other characters in the Esther narrative might have made giving Haman a voice very dangerous – the king, as a mimetic sponge, may have turned on Esther had she allowed Haman to contribute. In addition, Esther was the “one” against the “all.” It is interesting to think about what might have happened had Esther not turned the tables on Haman and instead asked him about the cause of his crusade. But it may not have gone well. The deck was stacked against Esther’s success.

The sailors here, unlike Esther, are the majority – there is safety in numbers as they say. Considering this it is even more remarkable that they remain calm and, further, avoid placing blame upon Jonah. They do not dichotomize. Indeed, they find no threat in Jonah and ask questions of him to include him in the problem-solving. The sailors, in a sense, are on a practical truth mission—they want to know what has caused the problem and how to fix it.

Even though Jonah *is* guilty of bringing on the crisis, the sailors, rather than blame him, place responsibility on him to help rectify what is happening. Jonah is called to responsibility by the sailors both when he is caught “in a trance” and when he is determined the guilty party by lot. The sailors give Jonah the opportunity to help fix the problem he caused rather than objectifying him and affixing him with irreparable blame.³³⁸

If the sailors’ cordiality is striking above, the next part of this scene is even more striking, and makes further, direct commentary on the scapegoat mechanism. After asking Jonah what the sailors must do to stop the storming seas, Jonah admits to his guilt and tells the sailors that they must throw him overboard. The sailors’ respond as follows: “Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land; but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them” (Jonah 1.13). The sailors, given permission from Jonah himself to perform the sacrifice of throwing him overboard, demonstrate here their outright denial to give in to violence. The sailors’ aversion to sacrificing Jonah was not overlooked by rabbinic commentators either. *Midrash Jonah*, for example, tells a humorous tale to underscore the compassion of the sailors (even upon a guilty party) and the impossible situation they faced:

They took him and placed him into the sea up to his knees, and the storm abated. They lifted him back on board, and the sea became agitated against them. They placed him back up to his neck, and the sea-storm abated. Once again they lifted him back among them, and the sea again agitated against them. Finally they cast him in entirely, and immediately the sea-storm abated.³³⁹

³³⁸ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 138. Tribble points out that the sailors’ choice of the word “evil” (*ra’a*) to describe their experience on the ship recalls Yahweh’s description of the Ninevites in 1.2 as also “evil.” This creates symmetry between Jonah (the cause of the evil befallen the sailors) and Nineveh (who chose evil and who come before the face of the divine.) This symmetry emphasizes the mirror image of Jonah and his “enemy” making a mimetic rivalry all the more obvious.

³³⁹ Quoted from Levine, 68-69; and in Sasson, 141.

The sailors are insistent upon respecting the humanity and life of Jonah, even in spite of Jonah's own insistence otherwise and his increasing liability to their own safety.

Another notable feature of the sailors' response to crisis is their sense of group cohesion. The sailors in this text are always referred to as a group, with the one exception of the captain who only appears in verse 6. Note these examples:

- In verse 5, the sailors "were afraid, and each cried to his god."
- In verse 7, "The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.'"
- In verse 8, "they" questioned Jonah.
- In verse 13, "the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land."

One might expect a leader to emerge among the sailors—especially when a crisis is at hand. One might especially expect one sailor, not the group as a whole, to cast the lots, or pose the questions to Jonah. But this does not occur. There is no sense of individual identity among the sailors—no one among them is fighting for their own survival. Unlike in a typical mimetic crisis, where each person's sense of individual identity gets caught in the web of rivalry and competition, here there is only one collective identity. The mimetic of the group is as powerful here for "blessing" and compassion as the group mimetic toward rivalry and violence is in Girard's "pagan" examples. In this context of cooperation and group cohesion, there would be no need to sacrifice a victim; the cohesion that is often attained by creating a scapegoat is *already* present.

Unfortunately, the sailors are seemingly in a no-win situation. The sailors believe they have done everything they could to avoid meeting their end in the sea—they prayed to their own gods, they tried to row back to shore, but to no

avail. They failed. Thus, they see only two possible solutions: either they all die, or they must sacrifice Jonah. The moral consciousness the sailors seem to demonstrate in their perceived need to create a “victim”, however, is important to note. The text explains: “They then appealed to the Lord, ‘Please, Lord, do not let us perish because of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging” (Jonah 1.14-15). Many commentators interpret these verses as evidence of the sailors’ heightened sense of duty, morality, and justice. Greenberg, for example, states:

Their prayer climaxes their service to the story as a spiritually sensitive foil to the unresponsive, finally lethargic, prophet. While he slept in the teeth of the storm, they made prayers each to his God; while he refused to warn Nineveh away from disaster, these heathen sailors risked their lives to save his; whereas he was in rebellion against his God, they acknowledged his sovereignty in their prayer to him.³⁴⁰

The sailors, I agree, initially act with a heightened sense of communal responsibility and spiritual consciousness, as Greenberg states. Their petition to God seems to underscore this heightened sense of spirituality and morality as well; it certainly sounds as if they are aware of the crime they are about to commit. But despite their understanding of the wrong, I will argue that they are not as spiritually enlightened as one might initially believe. If we dissect the petition of the sailors, we see that they unfortunately, ‘catch’ Jonah’s sacrificial inclination, and get swept up in the ease of correcting their situation through an act of scapegoating, and through the convenience of passing blame.

Both Sasson and Levine point out that the sailors make two separate appeals to God to somehow “neutralize” the guilt for committing a seemingly

³⁴⁰ Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 16. And “similar sentiments are expressed by most commentators.” See Sasson, 142, footnote 19.

unavoidable crime.³⁴¹ First, the sailors ask: “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life” (1.14a). In other words, the sailors ask that God not blame and punish them because of what they are about to do. The Targum, interestingly, translates this verse as: “Lord let us not perish [for the guilt of] this man’s life.”³⁴² According to Levine, the sailors here are emphasizing their merit as they did not willingly accede to Jonah’s request that he be thrown overboard.³⁴³ The passage cited from the *Midrash Jonah* above affirms this rabbinic viewpoint, namely that the sailors are taking Jonah’s life unwillingly. This initial plea does seem to imply that sailors are quite self-aware, and that they understand they are going to commit an undeniably wrong act. This plea also indicates awareness that they may receive retribution for their act. The sailors are aware of the cycle of vengeance that could take place, and see the divine as operating according to this same machinery. (They do not receive retribution, however, foreshadowing the mercy Yahweh bestows upon Nineveh later. The divine, even in this early episode, does not participate in the cycle of violence.)

The sailors’ second appeal—in Tanakh – however, reads, “do not make us guilty of innocent blood.”³⁴⁴ Sasson points out here that the phrase “innocent blood” can refer to both the *act* of shedding blood and the blamelessness of the victim. The Targum again supports the idea that the sailors are asking to be absolved for the act of killing Jonah. The Targum reads: “And do not lay upon us [the guilt of] innocent blood.”³⁴⁵ The combined Hebrew and Aramaic connotation of both shedding blood and the blamelessness of the victim drives home that the sailors understand themselves as doing something that is very wrong. The comedy of this scene, of course, is in the irony of Jonah’s obvious guilt contrasted with the sailors’ goodness. And the sailors are indeed praiseworthy in their generosity towards Jonah. In the final moment of reckoning,

³⁴¹ Sasson, 132; Levine, 68.

³⁴² Levine, 68.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Sasson, 132.

³⁴⁵ Levine, 68.

the sailors express no sense of vindictiveness toward Jonah for having caused the crisis.

The final clause of the sailors' petition casts a different light on the matter, though. While the sailors do not place blame upon Jonah, they find another culprit. The sailors end their plea with the words: "For you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you" (Jon. 1.14b). Up until this moment, the sailors seemed remarkable in their treatment of Jonah, in their sense of equanimity, and in their reasoned and calm fairness. They also, in their petition to this point, seem to express an acute awareness of their imminent violent act. But in this last clause, a shift occurs which squarely transfers the blame for the act from the sailors and onto God. The *Midrash Jonah* drives the point home that, indeed, the only way to abate the storm is by sacrificing Jonah, seemingly falling into this same sacrificial trap. While this very short episode of the sailors has demonstrated a very deliberate set of non-violent techniques for handling a crisis, and we even have a conscious aversion to creating a scapegoated victim out of Jonah, the sailors fall short of authentically taking responsibility for their crime. In fact, it may be *because* they understand that scapegoating violence is a crime, that they quickly and subtly pass the blame. At the last moment, they slip into their petition that God has set them up and has required them to perform this vicious act against their will.

The sailors' consciousness of scapegoating *as a crime* demonstrates profound anthropological and ethical awareness of *creating victims for the sake of safety and peace*. They know this is the wrong way to save themselves, but they have no other means yet of doing so, and so they rationalize their act through the erroneous idea that God is requiring their violence. This Girardian reading of the chapter has not only demonstrated specific steps that might be employed to avert a mimetic crisis from leading to violence, it also offers an anti-sacrificial reading of a sacrifice, underscoring the horror of the very mechanism it is portraying, and demonstrating how humans will project violence and blame

onto a deity with utter facility—such ease, in fact, that it escapes our notice nearly every time.

Sasson, for example, though he correctly interprets each of the passages on their own, unfortunately misconstrues what I consider to be the final anti-sacrificial intent of this chapter. Sasson concludes that the point of the sailors' petition is that they "are not completely convinced of the truth conveyed by Jonah" and that "the sailors have not yet completely and obediently yielded to God's will."³⁴⁶ While this theological interpretation is possible, emphasizing the omnipotence of the divine, it gives in to the sacrificial mentality that attributes the necessity of violence for reconciliation to God. In line with my own interpretation above, that God requires violence in this text, is nothing more than an assumption-- the *text does not say God requires Jonah's sacrifice*. According to the text, *Jonah himself* is the only one declaring that he must be thrown overboard to save the ship, and the reader of this text must be careful to avoid projecting Jonah's own human solution onto God.³⁴⁷

The sailors, in my estimation, in finally succumbing to a sacrificial remedy, and assuming God is requiring such, illustrate the gravitational pull of the sacrificial mentality upon humans. Jonah is entrenched in the sacrificial, and offers himself up several times before the sailors ultimately acquiesce. The

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 134.

³⁴⁷ This urge toward sacrifice is in line with Jonah's way of thinking throughout the text. As we will see in the analysis of the Ninevites, Jonah remains trapped in a type of binary, retributive mindset that cannot avoid violence for resolution. Tribble also emphasizes Jonah's responsibility here, in fact emphasizing the manipulation he uses to force the sailors into committing a crime. Tribble states: "Jonah seems willing to pay the price. He offers himself as sacrifice to save the sailors. The solution appears magnanimous, courageous, and altruistic. But appearance masks continuing disobedience. If neither flight nor sleep has saved Jonah from the divine imperatives, then perhaps drowning will. Concern for the sailors masks self-concern. Altruism discloses, even as it hides, egocentrism. Deception and irony abound in Jonah's character to entrap the sailors who surround him." See Tribble, 147. Tribble further points out how Jonah "traps" scholars! She points to Allen, "who thinks here Jonah 'realizes his guilt before God' (Leslie C. Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 210f); also Sternberg, who thinks that the story 'starts by opposing a compassionate Jonah to a wrathful God...' (Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 56). Tribble does not call up Girard in her discussion of Jonah, but seems in line with the Girardian insistence that the violence in this text is demanded by the human being (specifically here by Jonah) and not by God. See Tribble 147, footnote 73.

sailors start off as a model of non-violence, but get pulled into the mechanism of sacrificial offering; Jonah's mentality proves contagious. One might ask, then: what *would* God have willed here if it were included in the text? My thought is a repentant Jonah. Had Jonah repented, might the tempest have abated? I think so. A Girardian reading of text (thanks to the insights and interpretations of James Alison) reminds one in general to focus on the dilemmas humans are actually creating for themselves—that violence happens due to our own mimetic inclinations and desire to cast off blame.³⁴⁸ It is indeed tempting to blame God here and let the sailors absolve themselves of responsibility in the matter. What other options were available? The sailors might have pressed Jonah further with questions. Instead, the scapegoat mechanism provided a quick and efficacious solution in the midst of a death threat. Jonah was not willing to repent; and the sailors, in the end, prove they, too, lacked the patience, persistence, and creativity to resolve the crisis in a non-violent manner. In the end, they gave in. They *did* commit a crime, and it *was* Machiavellian—the storm abated after the sacrifice. The end justified the means. And they got to blame their violence on God.

That the sailors cannot be let off the hook for their violence is affirmed in the text. How odd, it seems at first, that the sailors offer up sacrifices to God after the tempest abates. It is as if their sacrificial “crime” was discovered to be the right thing to do. Just because God received Jonah in the sea does not mean that Jonah was returned in the right way. How might the sailors’ making sacrifices, after they experience the efficaciousness of the “sacrifice” of Jonah, then fit into the Girardian schema? Without delving into psychological types of rationalization, Girard has asserted (as discussed in chapter one) that sacrificial ritual is a re-enactment of an originary event in which crisis was averted through the ritual killing of a sacrificial victim. One may not be able to know what the intention of the author of Jonah was, nor what went through the minds of our

³⁴⁸ Compare to Girard's analysis of the Joseph cycle in Genesis in *I See Satan*, 118-119. Girard declares the Joseph cycle unique in its strong stand against idolatry: rather than demonize and then divinize Joseph, his brothers humanize Joseph thereby resisting the urge toward idolatry, in turn keeping collective violence out of the divine realm.

characters in this tale, but it seems possible to state a very simple fact about the structure of the narrative: that sacrifices are offered after the initial and immediately effective act of scapegoating. What we have here in this first chapter of Jonah, then, is a human movement away from sacrifice, countered by the gravitational pull that sacrifice has on human mentality. This text asserts, in Girardian fashion, how violence so quickly and readily becomes rationalized and sacralized. The text asserts that although sacrifice is initially confessed to be wrong, sacrificial violence becomes displaced as a desire of the deity, which is then met with further human sacrificial activity. This section, then, far from declaring the efficacy of sacrifice, is rather a conscious revelation of and polemic against the sacrificial mechanism. The sacrifices to this point are contained under the umbrella of this anti-sacrificial meta-narrative.

Part I (B): Expulsion, Despair, and the Cycle Repeats Itself

The theme of transferring blame and violence to the deity is brought out in the next chapter of Jonah as well. At the end of chapter 1, Jonah is cast overboard and is immediately swallowed by a “great fish” appointed by the Lord.³⁴⁹ The narrator tells us that Jonah remained in the fish for three days and three nights after which he is vomited up on land. The time that Jonah spends inside the fish is narrated through a psalm.

The psalm has been the source of much debate for more than a century. Source critics have argued for the psalm being a later addition to the book, neither composed nor included by the original author.³⁵⁰ Tribble and others have convincingly spelled out the arguments for different authorship. The psalm is, indeed, a generic type of thanksgiving psalm that seems inserted to move the narrative forward in some way. The question really is what exactly its meaning

³⁴⁹ To note is that God *did* provide the great fish to save Jonah. The biblical text is quite clear in God's saving activity, with any violence projected by humans onto the deity.

³⁵⁰ Tribble, 160. She offers a long list of scholars taking this position in footnote number 8.

is, and how one can understand this type of psalm coming out the mouth of Jonah at this point in the book. Whether authorship may or may not prove consistent (and resolution of this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation), the function of the psalm is continuous with the rest of the book inside the context of this Girardian analysis, as I will now discuss.

Whether or not one sympathizes with the character of Jonah, this psalm's structural function certainly gives insight into the scapegoated individual's psyche. What is perhaps most interesting and pertinent for our purpose here is how Jonah is unable to see himself as responsible for his predicament, but instead sees it as something orchestrated by Yahweh:

You cast me into the depth, into the heart of the seas.

A current whirled around me;
Your breakers and waves all swept over me.

The narrative in the preceding chapter, unlike the words of this psalm, describes Jonah being hurled into the sea by the sailors *at Jonah's request* (1.15). There is thus a shift here from the sacrifice being Jonah's request to Jonah's placing the responsibility for the sacrifice onto Yahweh. The projection of this sacrificial violence onto the sacred is subtle and barely noticed by the reader of the text who likely assumes *all* activity is orchestrated by the deity. Jonah himself, a person of faith, likely viewed God as responsible for all events as well. The narrator, contrarily, is quite clear in how only *Jonah* is responsible for his own expulsion. The sailors' ironic rendering of Jonah as "innocent" in the previous episode may, in fact, also emphasize the author's opposite point of Jonah's guilt. The reader can well note the humor in remarking of the fleeing and sleeping prophet as "innocent." Far from being innocent, Jonah carries a sacrificial mentality throughout the book, and infects the sailors as shown, illustrating how

all, to this point, have quite unconsciously participated in blaming the act of scapegoating on the sacred.

Trible maintains that the psalm is of different authorship, and details how other aspects of the psalm disagree with the surrounding narrative. She points to the vocabulary of the psalm as divergent from the typical vocabulary of the narrative text, as well as the general theologizing of the text. The differing vocabulary is not pertinent for us here, and may be pursued if of interest through Tribble's work. The theologizing of the text is pertinent, however, in how it illustrates a more general biblical tendency to project nature, but more importantly *human nature*, onto the sacred. Using Jonah's psalm, Tribble gives the example of how the narrator's "belly of the fish" becomes the psalmist's "womb of Sheol." Later on in time and in a similar vein, we see how the fish's belly becomes the allegorical site for Christ's harrowing of hell.

There is a tendency to infuse religious meaning into natural and historical occurrences in both the Hebrew and the Christian imagination; also to propose the divine as the purposeful mover of the world. But what happens when one theologizes the violent aspect of human nature as we have here? Cary and others, as Tribble pointed out and I discuss above, are tricked into believing that Jonah *had to be* cast into the sea as a sign of the sailors' acquiescing to God's will. Jonah himself seems to believe this, too. Even the sailors, in the end, believe they need to propitiate the violent deity. Scholars, indeed, have fallen into the same problematic delusion as Jonah and our sailors, which might be said to be a type of unconscious avoidance. Jonah, in this psalm, gives voice to his own unwillingness to accept responsibility for his own expulsion; Jonah, in a sense, cannot even see that his refusal to repent and pray to God necessitated the sacrifice. Instead, Jonah declares in a seemingly sycophantic fashion, that he is grateful for Yahweh's having cast him into the depths, and then heard his cries: "From the belly of Sheol I cried for help—You heard my voice." In doing so, Jonah creates a *pharmakon* out of himself—i.e. a victim become redeemed—

but also a type of *pharmakon* out of God, that is, a God that must victimize so that he can save.³⁵¹

This very subtle but poignant aspect of dissonance between the narrative text and the psalm reveals the sacralizing arc that Girard has defined as the “pagan” sacred; that is, the sacred that emerges out of sacrificial violence. Tribble adds a further point supportive of this arc as well. Tribble distinguishes the psalmist as thanking God and performing cultic acts, versus Jonah who “defies Yhwh to the end.”³⁵² These cultic offerings of the psalmist are acts of repetition to a deity who we believe requires propitiation and thanksgiving—a human offering thanks to the divine for “saving” them from a situation that they (wrongly) blame on the deity to begin with. This kind of “religion” is, in this sense, something of a fallacy—it is projecting responsibility for violence and salvation outward instead of using these dramatic events to look inward and at the processes that cause this type of cycle to repeat itself. Jonah’s defiance, as Tribble calls it, seems the more honest interpretation of what is happening in the narrative, but becomes lost underneath a heavy theological and poetic lens. While Jonah’s psalm may be authentic, it is neither truthful nor responsible. It shows that Jonah, like the reader, is lost in what Girard would call the poetic or “romantic” lie.

Chapter 2 of Jonah, in this light, is the perfect conclusion to the first half of the book whose purpose is to shine the spotlight on humankind, and challenge the reader to shed the violence from their hands. This does not mean to place the violence on the divine. It is to sacrifice violence, and the evil inclination, altogether, realizing the violence and the tendency to blame is within us. The sailors provide an excellent model to emulate to a point—they do manage to avoid the trappings of mimetic rivalry and violence even under severe conditions of crisis. But in the end the non-violent project is a failed one and their submission to the sacrificial mentality and to violence in turn has them create a

³⁵¹ The sailors similarly fall into this pit of becoming victims (subject to the will of a violent God), only to have this violent God extend mercy and redeem them.

³⁵² Tribble, 160.

violent deity to absorb their guilt. Further violent offerings are then sacrificed for this violent sacred, beginning their entrapment in the romantic lie. The psalm of chapter 2 continues to harp on this anti-sacrificial polemic, revealing how these failed attempts turn “poetic” in our imaginations under the guise of sacrificial theology and a sacrificial God. The book of Jonah continues its revelation of these Girardian principles in the second half of the book to which we now turn.

Part II (A): Resetting the Stage—Experimenting with a Different Paradigm: Reconciliation without Sacrifice

Part two consists of chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Jonah, which are something of a retake of the first half of the book. Chapter 3 resets the scene with the Lord calling out a second time to Jonah. Whereas in chapter 1 the Lord calls Jonah and Jonah flees, here the Lord calls again and Jonah does as commanded: “So the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying: ‘Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city; let her hear the proclamation I am telling you.’ Jonah arose and went to Nineveh as he had been told by the Lord” (Jon. 3.1-2).

Jonah’s obedience allows attention to shift, at least temporarily, to Nineveh, which is described as a “great city before God, a three days’ walk” (3.3). It is uncertain why exactly Nineveh is described in such a fashion; it does seem sure, however, that the greatness of Nineveh is here extending beyond size. What most commentators agree upon is that the phrase suggests that Nineveh is of importance in God’s eyes—that perhaps God has ordained greatness for the city, or perhaps it suggests a divine abode (“great-for-God”).³⁵³

³⁵³ Tribble, 178. The designation as such is particularly odd given the “greatness” of Nineveh’s evil according to other sources. According to John Craghan, for example, Nineveh “connotes war, oppression, and brutality. Nineveh was the quintessence of insolence and unbridled inhumanity...to think that God would send a prophet to offer Nineveh the chance to repent seemed the greatest folly, if not the greatest contradiction. By choosing Nineveh, the author suggests the worst form of pagan life.” See John Craghan, *Old Testament Message: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982), 166-7.

The repeated use of the term “great” also recalls the “great” wind, the “great” fear, and the “great” fish of which the reader has already heard—all wonders of miraculous proportion—indicating once again that Nineveh will be the site of something out of the ordinary. And indeed it is.

The next few lines consist of Jonah’s entering the city and proclaiming, though his proclamation does not conform to the standard prophetic formula. Jonah gets about one day’s walk into the city, indicating that he is only shy about one half-day from the city center, and called, “Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned!” This is perhaps the shortest of all biblical prophecies, with what is also perhaps the most dramatic response. Though only five words in Hebrew, it is this short proclamation that makes clear the choice given to human beings to either remain embedded in the violent sacrificial structure of the past, or to embrace the opportunity for change.

The nature of this choice between continuity and change is inherent in the equivocal language of the proclamation. For Tribble, the words Jonah utters are inherently unstable and invite “characters and readers to exploit meanings.”³⁵⁴ She points, for example, to the lack of the prophetic formula “Thus says Yahweh”, going so far as to question the authenticity of Jonah’s pronouncement.³⁵⁵ Given Jonah’s defiance throughout on the one hand, and the fear that was likely present in traveling into enemy territory on the other, one can conceive of this pronouncement as a quick “let me just proclaim something and run” type of action. Tribble also brings out the ambiguity that can be found in the language of Jonah’s pronouncement: the ‘*od* (“yet”) plus the conventional ‘forty days’, for example, “signifies an unspecified time of trial and testing that does not forecast the outcome.”³⁵⁶ Forty days also signifies, however, a complete number in the scriptures, connoting that during this period a complete process will occur.

³⁵⁴ Tribble, 180.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

Even more important is of what this forty day process will consist. Jonah's short prophecy declares that Nineveh, in forty days, will be "overturned." Trible discusses the "mercurial" verb form of "to [over]turn" that contains opposites within its meaning and seems deliberately ambiguous. Sasson also comments on the ambiguity of the verb form used here. The narrative reports that Nineveh, in the Hebrew, is to become *nehpaket*, an "N form" of the verb *hpk*, which can be either passive or reflexive, the verb *hpk* itself comprehensively meaning either destruction or deliverance. The verb is the same verb used of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.21, 25, 29) and "becomes part of a biblical cliché used to describe wrath and destruction" that is as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah's demise.³⁵⁷

The verb is also used to indicate a type of transformation of one thing into another—giving the message, according to Cary, that things might not be as they seem. Cary cites numerous examples of how this verb denotes transformations including: Moses' staff turning into a snake (Exod. 7.15); the waters of Egypt turning to blood (Exod. 7.17); Joel warning the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood (Joel 2.31); feasting turned to mourning (Lam. 5.15; Amos 8.10); and mourning turned to joy (Esth. 9.22; Ps. 30; Jer. 31.31). Perhaps most striking is the use of the verb in I Samuel 10.6 when Saul is "turned into another man." A few verses later the narrator also describes how Saul's heart was turning into another heart (10.9).³⁵⁸ These transformations—significant transformations of the natural world and of human nature—come across as immediate and dramatic. They exist outside the realm of the ordinary, and constitute a complete 180 degree turn around, whether it is Saul turning from rancher to ruler, or a piece of wood into a snake.

There are many translations possible of this one phrase upon which Nineveh's fate seems to rest, providing no certain outcome. Either Nineveh will

³⁵⁷ Cary, 108. Cary points to other biblical narratives that use this verb: it is used for Babylon (Isa. 13.19; Jer. 50.40); for Israel (Deut. 29.23; Lam. 4.6; Amos 4.11); and of Edom (Jer. 49.18).

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

meet the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, or it will perhaps, like Saul, receive another heart. According to Sasson, the reflexive sense of the verb was often preferred by the early rabbis who translated the passage as “Forty more days, Nineveh is to *turn over*.” That is, “reform”—providing a clear and definitive result. For the rabbis, this translation would avoid a deity who purposefully tests (e.g. Gen. 22), provokes (Exod. 7.13), misleads (Judg. 14.4), or deceives (I Kgs. 22.19-23), in addition solving the potential theological problem of God changing his mind.³⁵⁹ Perhaps there is also irony in that, while God intended the verb to denote deliverance, Jonah was using the verb in its opposite sense—to indicate that in forty days Nineveh will be overturned and destroyed.

Most rabbinic tractates demonstrate preference for interpreting the verb as purposefully ambiguous, though, and many commentators have followed suit. The Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin* (89b), for example, dwells on this point: “Jonah was originally told that Nineveh would be turned, but did not know whether for good or evil.”³⁶⁰ Sasson enumerates the scholars that have written in favor of this position: scholars writing in the medieval Jewish commentaries as mentioned in Zlotowitz; and those writing modern commentaries mentioned by Clements, Halpern and Friedman.³⁶¹ Sasson mentions only König who has spoken out against this interpretation.³⁶²

The more popular rabbinic interpretation of Jonah’s proclamation as deliberately ambiguous is in line with the discussion to this point about the book’s emphasis on taking responsibility for change instead of apportioning blame; in addition, there is the injunction that one may need to change on a dime. The earlier rabbis, who had an underlying concern for God’s immutability, also, by implication, put forth an anthropology of human immutability. If Jonah’s prophecy was unequivocally about Nineveh’s destruction, then the Ninevites had no

³⁵⁹ Sasson, 234.

³⁶⁰ Soncino Talmud 1935a: 594, quoted in Sasson, 235.

³⁶¹ Meir Zlotowitz, *Jonah: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed. (NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1980), 122; Ronald E. Clements, “The Purpose of the Book of Jonah,” *VTS* 28: 16-28 (1975); B. Halpern and R. Friedman, “Composition and Paronomasia in the Book of Jonah,” *HAR* 4 (1980), 79-92.

³⁶² See Sasson, 235.

opportunity to participate in their own fate. The later rabbis' possibility for change, however, opens the door to a humanity that is able to take responsibility for their future. God, in the end, may or may not accept their restitution, but the possibility of salvation is open. The deliberately ambiguous verb use, which can lead to either deliverance or destruction, denotes the hinge upon which fate can so easily turn, and whether one will actually wake up and do what is necessary.³⁶³ The next question is whether they will do it in time.

The Ninevites sense this urgency and waste no time in the next verses. As quickly as Jonah's proclamation is spilled out, the Ninevites respond. Verse 5 tells the reader: "And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them." The immediacy of this statement about the Ninevites' belief signals a radical shift in the story. Whereas Jonah's proclamation was inherently ambiguous and unstable, leaving the fate of this city undetermined, the city's inhabitants do not respond in kind—there is no ambiguity in their response. With utter conviction, the totality of the population that "believes" and takes on acts of penance is indicated in the phrase "from the greatest to the least of them." As Tribble points out, both the reference to "the people of Nineveh" and the further detail provided by "the greatest to the least of them" signifies the total population.³⁶⁴ Why the Ninevites respond so decisively and immediately remains unknown from the text, but their lack of resistance certainly stands in stark contrast to Jonah's obstinacy.³⁶⁵

The remainder of chapter 3 of Jonah follows suit and depicts Nineveh as a city of collective effort, true community, hierarchy yet equality, and a distinct (and surprising, given their reputation) lack of any type of conflict, rivalry or struggle. The text reports how, once the news reached the king, "he rose from his throne and stripped off his royal mantle; he put on sackcloth and sat on dirt."

³⁶³ This, of course, is also the foundational hinge for the holiday of Yom Kippur, the day on which one's actions and intentions are scrutinized by the divine. One will either be inscribed in the Book of Life for the coming year, or one will not.

³⁶⁴ Tribble, 181.

³⁶⁵ For a list of how rabbis and commentators have tried to fill this gap, see Sasson, 244.

The king responds just as the people of his kingdom—with immediacy and humility.

What is also striking here is that the king is never given a name; Sasson, in fact, calls “the king of Nineveh” a “bogus designation” as such a title has never been historically documented. (The typical designation was King of Assyria—never king of Nineveh.)³⁶⁶ Searches for who this king could have been are numerous, but inconclusive. Instead, one might ask why the king is deliberately not named in the text—the answer perhaps being that the narrator’s point is not about an individual personality. Rather, it seems like the king is deliberately unnamed just as the sailors go unnamed, connoting a distinct lack of ego in leadership, and a deliberate attempt to avoid getting bogged down in details of character. The import of this chapter is on the immediate and communal penitential response—and not on praising the responders’ identities or distinct personalities.

That the king sits on “dirt” is also worthy of comment. Most translations render the Hebrew word (*‘eper*) as “ashes”, bringing to mind images of burnt sacrifices, especially in light of both the sailors and Jonah’s promises of these sacrifices earlier in the book. As Sasson points out, however, this Hebrew term is “precise only in referring to soil, whatever its ingredients; the same can be said of Greek *spodos*, which the LXX uses in translation.”³⁶⁷ Acknowledging the more specific translation of this term as “soil” highlights the *absence* of any sacrificial activity accompanying the king’s response. There is no sacrifice ordered in the king’s edict, nor in his own action, as a vehicle through which to gain God’s mercy. To further emphasize this absence of sacrificial activity, the king then orders all of the inhabitants of Nineveh, *including animals*, to fast, wrap themselves in sackcloth, and appeal to God with fervor. The inclusion of animals in the penitential activity of Nineveh has piqued the curiosity of many commentators who have typically scoured the scriptures and classical texts

³⁶⁶ Sasson, 249.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 251.

looking for parallels. Within the schema of our Girardian analysis, however, the inclusion of animals in penitential activity only underscores the value and the fragility of their lives over and against their functional usage as scapegoats for human salvation. There is no substitution of any kind here—no transference of blame or guilt. Bringing the animals into the collective mourning emphasizes how each person, and the community as a whole, is taking responsibility for their previous behavior.

If the behaviors of Nineveh so far denote a humble, peaceful, and supplicating response to Jonah's proclamation, the king's decree that is uttered next confirms that the Ninevites are embracing an inner change and not just an outward display of ritual. The king's command explicitly details this inner change, and calls on his people to relinquish violence: "Each person must forsake his evil conduct and/all must turn away from the/violence they plan against others/Who can tell? God himself may consider a change of mind and draw away from his anger, so that we may not perish" (3.8b-9). The word for violence here is *hamas*, which refers to "the physical violence that issues from wicked design and purpose."³⁶⁸ The Ninevites are clearly being urged away from not just evil deeds in this passage, but of evil intentions ("violence they *plan*").³⁶⁹ Sasson adds that:

This [linguistic] construction encourages the mind to imagine a whole series of paired hands; consequently, it particularizes and individualizes the bearers of violence even as it distributes their culpability upon and among the whole community. The violence to which the king is alluding is internal to Nineveh's citizenry.³⁷⁰

Sasson's assertion that the violence is "internal to Nineveh's citizenry" conveys the idea that the violence is embedded in the structure of Nineveh's communal relations. He seems to indicate that the problem of violence belongs to each

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 259.

³⁶⁹ There are numerous scriptural parallels that tell of how *hamas* is provocative, entailing either punishment of the wicked or saving of the innocent (e.g. Gen. 6.11-13).

³⁷⁰ Sasson, 259.

individual, but is also the problem of the residents on the whole. As Sasson also adds, this violence can refer to specific acts (which the rabbis emphasized), but also an ethical stance (which is prevalent in scriptural passages such as Job 16.17 or 1Chr. 12.18).³⁷¹ In Girardian terms, Sasson is here referring to the sacrificial mentality that has been the founding structure of society—and this is what must now be “overturned.”

Such a dramatic and immediate change—for this seems to be nothing less than a complete transformation of perspective and, in turn, behavior—is captured in the verb *suv*, which indicates “to turn.” This verb is characteristic of the Jewish notion in general, “to return,” which is a central concept I will discuss in more detail below. For now, to note is how the Ninevites, who “turn”, call for a mimetic response from the deity to “turn” from his anger and have mercy—a kind of *quid pro quo* exchange. The Ninevites put in the effort in what seems a genuine attempt to cull a positive response, while actively acknowledging the ambiguity of their fate: “Who knows?” expresses this uncertainty, yet also the positive possibility that deliverance may prevail.

The Ninevite theology is, in fact, cognizant of a perspective that upholds the power of human will and action to determine one’s fate. The Ninevites understood the ambiguity involved in their own situation—perhaps they understood they were teetering on the edge of destruction and deliverance—an ambiguity that perhaps Jonah did not quite understand. The tone of Nineveh’s reflection seems open to a relationship with a deity who responds to human effort, whereas Jonah’s proclamation seemed more a reified pagan oracle of doom than a verbal message of opportunity.

The final verse of chapter 3 tells the reader of the response one might expect from such a dramatic turn around and relinquishing of violence. The reader is told God’s immediate response to Nineveh’s repentance: “When God himself examined their deeds—for they forsook their evil conduct—he renounced

³⁷¹ Ibid.

plans for the disaster he had threatened against them and did not carry it out.” In the text here it is certainly God who is said to be responsible for the continued existence of Nineveh. Inside a Girardian perspective, one might for a moment de-theologize the text here as well, to think about how penitential, peaceful, communal responses to crisis may in fact be more productive ways to approach crisis (and preserve life) than utilizing the scapegoat mechanism (which gets born of the violence of uncontrolled mimetic rivalry). Instead of violent rivalry here, one has a mimetic of blessing—a positive, penitential turning that is met with a positive, life-giving response. Nineveh ceases violence, and God ceases violence. It seems no doubt that a positive mimetic is at work here where blessing is returned with blessing.

The rabbis (particularly the Bavli rabbis) emphasize the continued efforts made on the part of Ninevites as well; they suggest that the Ninevites’ repentance involved not just what is accounted for in the Tanakh, but additional concrete deeds of kindness. According to the commentaries, the Ninevites “did not stop at fasting and praying. They took actions that showed they were determined to lead a better life.” One specific midrash, for example, recounts how they returned objects they had stolen, and confessed to undiscovered crimes they had committed before the courts. Another midrash tells the story of a Ninevite man who found a treasure on the lot he had recently bought from his neighbor. He went to the seller and offered him the treasure, explaining that he had bought the land and nothing more. But the seller insisted that the sale of the lot carried with it all that it contained. Both men refused to take possession of the treasure and, with the help of the court, went in search of its legitimate owners.

When God saw the behavior of these two Ninevite men, and of all the others who not only admitted their faults but engaged in acts of repair and kindness, there could be no doubt, the city had be spared.³⁷² These midrashim

³⁷² Story thanks to Rabbi Joel Fleekop, “Yom Kippur Morning Sermon given on Saturday, September 22, 2007,” accessed on December 1, 2012, <http://www.shirhadash.org/rabbi/07/09/22/imperfect.html>.

do not only point to the reciprocity possible between humankind and the deity, but importantly portray a positive, beneficial mimetic between persons. The generosity of the individuals in these stories is as contagious as mimetic rivalry, showing how acts of kindness may well be met similarly.

How easily the Ninevites seem to have turned the tables and understood the importance of preserving life, sacrificing only sacrifice itself. They so easily seem to have renounced rivalry and violent conflict, instead calling for peaceful coexistence and the preservation and communion with animals. For Girard, this goes against the grain of humankind's frustrating inability to escape mimetic violence, proactively creating a life-affirming mimetic of blessing. The resolution of the crisis may be understood on the simple human plane—that is, a crisis resolved by human means through penitence—and also, as a divine-human relationship in which the community has repented and is saved by God.

Trible calls on form criticism in her identification of Jonah as a crisis text, distinguishing the *sitz im leben* of Jonah as similar to other texts in which a people faces disaster, responds in penitence, and receives deliverance. She puts forth that Jonah 3, and its parallels in Jonah 1, belong to a community of literature with conventional speech for crisis settings. While the Jonah texts do not conform to all six of the categories she mentions, it does embody five of the six (all the following except #3): 1) The crisis involves the whole community; 2) Individual leaders emerge in the crisis; 3) Cultic sites often provide the setting for the crisis (not in Jonah); 4) Penitential acts characterize responses to disaster; 5) Penitential acts lead to deliverance; and 6) Conventional vocabulary marks these conventional situations (e.g. cries of anguish, turning from evil, repent, who knows, etc.).³⁷³

In the earliest and formative days of Judaism, what we therefore have is this text, which provides a direct “antidote” to crisis that seems remarkably new, unique, and anti-sacrificial. Interestingly, Sasson recalls a Mari prophetic text

³⁷³ Tribble, 193.

from the Ancient Near East as a parallel to Jonah. Sasson (in my estimation, erroneously) describes this text as asserting “spiritual renewal is made more concrete by the cessation of violence.”³⁷⁴ The text speaks of the god Dagan who warns the king that “there will be a ‘consumption’ [i.e. plague]. Demand from each town that they return tattooed objects. A man who had done a violent act must be ejected from town.”³⁷⁵ Sasson gives nothing further of the ancient text, nor further analysis than this. It seems, though, that the ejection of the man who had done violence means, to Sasson, a relinquishing of evil and a cessation of violence similar to what we have in the Ninevites’ action. What Sasson does not see is that the banishment is in itself a form of violence and recourse to the scapegoat mechanism to solve the crisis at hand in that text. Further, it is unclear the process by which the community mentioned will determine who it is to be banished. Such an unclear judicial process combined with what seems obvious blame and expulsion in the seeking of relief from a plague, is a classic form of persecution—and a typical ‘persecution text’ by Girard’s standards.

Contrary to such Sasson’s analogy, the Ninevites are inclusive in their response to crisis—they fast, mourn, and maintain self-control—they acknowledge their responsibility in the matters of their past, their present, and their future—and refuse to put their sins onto a scapegoat. In the first half of the book, though the sailors are remarkably calm and also communal in response to their crisis, they still resort to blame-casting (i.e. casting lots), and in the end to scapegoating (in my estimation there were other options available.) Their sacrificial offerings of thanksgiving, and Jonah’s promise of offerings from the belly of the whale, demonstrate a sustained mentality of violence, despite certain efforts to the contrary. The Ninevites, alternatively, present a radically new paradigm—a paradigm that does not even consider the literal sacrifice of the sailors. The Ninevites have sacrificed only their sacrificial mentality; they have completed a spiritual overturning that speaks nothing of blame, but answers the

³⁷⁴ Sasson, 259.

³⁷⁵ *ARM XXVI*: 206, in Sasson, 259.

divine warning with humility, kindness, and surrender. Costumed animals complete the picture of this ironic and comical anti-sacrifice.

Part II (B): Who Will Be “Overturned”?

Chapter 4 is the final chapter of the book of Jonah and has been wrought with oddities and ambiguities for most biblical commentators. Its general thrust is clear, however, in that it presents the reader with a series of interactions between Yahweh and his prophet, all of them in some way exploring the divine response to Nineveh on one hand, and Jonah’s human response on the other. While Jonah witnesses the profound transformation of a “great city,” he himself is caught up in anguish over God’s extension of mercy. In this last chapter, the reader becomes acutely aware of Jonah’s deep struggle with the new paradigm of non-violence being put forth, and the release of rivalry and sacrificial models. The conversation between Jonah and Yahweh in this last chapter presents ways in which the deity, in effect, tries to help Jonah “overturn” to a new way of thinking and behaving that leaves sacrifice behind. The chapter begins by providing Jonah’s reaction to events in Nineveh and makes use of key words that set the tone. We are introduced here to Jonah’s “burning”, which occurs as a “great evil” to him, such a severe emotional response that Jonah recites a prayer in which he wishes to die. Yahweh responds by asking if the “burning” is desirable. The text reads:

And it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and it burned to him. And he prayed to Yahweh and said: “Ah! Yahweh, was not this my word when I was in my homeland? Therefore I hastened to flee to Tarshish because I knew that you, God, are gracious and merciful, long of nostrils, and abundant of faithfulness, and repenting about the evil. And now, Yahweh, take, please, my life from me for better my death than my life. And Yahweh said, “Is it good it burns to you?” (4.1-4)

Trible's reading of these verses brings out the importance of how the narrator is using wordplay to emphasize the major themes found in the book of Jonah on the whole, specifically anger and evil, here applied to illustrate Jonah's difficulty with the mission he had been given, and the result it produced.³⁷⁶ Jonah's himself must in fact now confront what others in his book have already conquered: God was able to turn from the "burning of his nostrils"; Nineveh was able to turn from their evil and the violence of their hands; and now both burning and evil have come upon Jonah. The question is will Jonah be "overturned"?³⁷⁷

The themes here are less important, however, than the structure of thought that has given the text its shape. Whereas Tribble (as many commentators) focus on the *themes* of the text, Girard focuses on the scapegoat mechanism as the *structural principle* that organizes religious texts; the scapegoat "cannot appear in the text though he controls all of its themes...He cannot become the theme of the text that he *shapes*. This is not a theme, but a mechanism for giving *structure*."³⁷⁸ In Girardian terms, the "themes" of which Tribble speaks are in fact the principles that reveal the mentality that has produced the text.³⁷⁹ In myth, of course the scapegoat mechanism operates behind the scenes and remains undisclosed, the victim blamed and left without a voice to

³⁷⁶ The midrash also indicates the destructiveness of this emotion, as discussed in previous chapters. As further examples, Pirke Avot states: "Ben Zoma said: Who is strong? He who subdues his evil inclination, as it is stated, "He who is slow to anger is better than a strong man, and he who masters his passions is better than one who conquers a city" (Proverbs 16:32)." Significantly, Jonah has even been cast as the Messiah ben Joseph (as was Ephraim as discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation) in rare strands of Jewish mysticism, symbolizing the death of the yetzer ha-ra. See Y. Liebe, "Jonah as the Messiah ben Joseph," *JSJT* 3 (1983-4), 269-311; reprinted in Hacker and Dan, eds., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy, and Ethical Literature*, 1986.

³⁷⁷ The message may be, too, not so much about the universality of God's providence (which is how it is commonly interpreted) in as much as it about the reversal of a death sentence. The opposites contained in Jonah's proclamation of *nhpk* ("to overturn") represent a roll of the dice: will Nineveh receive destruction or deliverance? Given the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and also the fate that meets Haman, one might expect, like Jonah, that destruction will follow. And so we are all perhaps surprised at the result.

³⁷⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 118.

³⁷⁹ Whereas in myth, this mentality is unconscious and sacrificial, the scapegoat mechanism operating but not revealed, the text we have here is disclosing the problem of sacrifice with full awareness.

create the “good” of a reconciled and peaceful community. The biblical witness such as we have here, contrarily, overtly discloses to the reader the sacrificial mentality that is giving the text its structure. This overt disclosure was seen in how the sailors and Jonah openly discussed the violence of scapegoating, while resorting to scapegoating! The Ninevites, on the other hand, explicitly command the renunciation of all violence, revealing the immediate resolution and reconciliation that can result when this sacrificial structure is abandoned. Structurally, in the sailors’ episode, sacrificial offerings follow the expulsion of the scapegoat, heaping violence upon violence in a vicious structure of conflict and abatement that is self-perpetuating.³⁸⁰ The Ninevites abandon all violence for a complete reconciliation that requires nothing further. The sailor’s tragic structure that perpetuates violence is contrasted with the comical “happily ever after” of the Ninevites.

This current episode is focused on Jonah alone, and in turn the reader: will Jonah be able to step out of the structure that has formed him? Will he be able to step into the new paradigm as both Nineveh and Yahweh have done—the one that utilizes the mimetic of blessing over sacrifice? Will Jonah let the evil that has taken over him die to let a new structure reign? Will he at least make it as far as the sailors, that is, to be aware of the violence of his structuring, though unable to transform? In these episodes, “overturning” does indeed require destruction—but it is the destruction of a mentality, not of a scapegoat. Structurally, the text itself will need to abandon conflict, as in the narrative of Ephraim and Manasseh, if one is to believe Jonah has made this change himself.

To this point, it is uncertain whether Jonah will make this change. Despite Jonah’s obedient behavior in chapter 3, there has been no further evidence to indicate greater self-awareness or internal transformation. We have only seen his tendency to think in terms of the old structure of blame and sacrifice, and thus

³⁸⁰ Recall here Girard’s notion of “good” violence (i.e. sacrifices, which are acceptable within the confines of religious practice) casting out bad violence, which is how he interprets the gospel passage “Satan casting out Satan.” See chapter 1 above.

the text continues its dialogue in a fashion that persuades the reader of Jonah's sustained internal struggle.

For example, Jonah's prayer to Yahweh in verses 2-3 of this chapter is less of a prayer than a kind of "I told you so." The reader is let in on an explanation for why Jonah fled his calling to prophecy in chapter 1, which Jonah declares was not due to a problem in Jonah himself, but due to Yahweh's merciful nature. Using the form of prayer, for a second time, Jonah is actually blaming Yahweh for the prophet's own misery, and is now asking for rescue through death. The *Midrash Jonah* may indeed support this interpretation, which has Jonah realizing God's compassion only after the miracle of Nineveh. Given this, one might say Jonah is retroactively justifying his past actions through blaming Yahweh's character.³⁸¹ More importantly, using prayer as a structure to cast blame upon God is presenting a superficial piety as we saw Jonah do before while in the belly of the fish. The conflict between the structure of Jonah's speech and the content of his speech illustrates the irony of a religion that uses sacrificial violence to atone for one's acts of violence. Jonah casts out God through his prayer, as God is cast out through sacrificial violence.

Jonah, further, does not consider opening up to another point of view. This strikes a similar note to his episode aboard the ship, too: Jonah failed to consider repenting as a means to save the sailors and ship in chapter 1, preferring death over life; he might well have known repenting would have resolved the crisis, but he did not let on he knew this, and was certainly unwilling to change his heart. In the episode we have here in chapter 4, Jonah similarly fails to consider an alternative perspective on the matter. The reader has slowly but surely been exposed to Jonah's inner world, and one sees that Jonah simply cannot bear Yahweh's bestowing forgiveness to Israel's enemies.³⁸²

³⁸¹ Quoted in Sasson, 279.

³⁸² As aforementioned, rabbinic commentators will often interpret Jonah's fleeing from his call as an action demonstrating his allegiance to Israel (as a prophet, Jonah knew Nineveh would again "turn" and defeat Israel.) They therefore construe nobility in his character, and courage in his desire to stand up for Israel, even if it means going against his divine call. As the *Mekilta*,

Sternberg asserts that the text “overturns” the reader here in chapter 4 on an ideological level as well: the narrative “plays a dangerous game in misleading the reader almost to the end...[the sparing of Nineveh and Jonah’s angry prayer] shatters the entire model of the narrative and the narrative world and world view...” to demonstrate that God is merciful and Jonah wrathful.³⁸³ Tribble adds: “the overturning (*hpk*) that happens within the story also happens between the story and the reader.”³⁸⁴ As detailed in chapter one of this dissertation, Girard’s anthropological interpretation of scripture, especially the New Testament, makes the point of violence as a human problem that, through sacrificial theology, got projected onto the sacred. For Girard, however, the revelation of the cross--a revelation that began with the Hebrew Scriptures--was to make humanity’s own violence apparent. This is a shift in perspective removing violence from the deity. Sternberg discusses how this shift is happening within the very text of Jonah above, lending support for Girard’s thesis. Inside the text of Jonah, the reader is able to discern the tendency to project wrath onto God, radically shifting the problem of violence back onto humanity.

This shifting of violence back onto humanity and off of God places responsibility for change back into human hands as well. This is something to which Jonah’s inclination to blame makes him blind. From the beginning, Jonah seems to overlook Nineveh’s mature response to his proclamation—*they* were the ones responsible for the outcome, not Jonah, and not even Yahweh. (Had the Ninevites remained violent, surely they would have been destroyed rather than delivered.) Jonah implicates only God in his struggle, though: it is because of Yahweh’s mercy that Jonah is angered and wants to die; it is because of

Pisha says: “Jeremiah sought the honor of [God] and the honor of [Israel];.../ Elijah sought the honor of [God] and not the honor of [Israel];.../ Jonah sought the honor of [Israel] and not the honor of [God].” Quoted in Sasson, 323. Both Jonah and Esther may be interpreted in this nationalistic sense, but in my view this type of interpretation misses the revelation of mimetic rivalry and violence that comes out of the text. It is possible that a nationalistic interpretation can work, but only if boundaries elicit generosity, and not rivalry. (This idea of boundaries will be discussed in the next chapter in the context of positive mimesis.)

³⁸³ Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 318-320; Tribble, 203.

³⁸⁴ Tribble, 203.

Yahweh's mercy that Nineveh will grow and one day defeat Israel. Jonah similarly sees Yahweh as responsible for his ill experience being cast off the ship, as I detailed in the above section. Though couched in the language of prayer, Jonah is neither humble nor supplicating. Jonah is unable to face his own self-absorbed viewpoint; moreover, he is a bad theologian, stuck in a theology of rigid conformity based on retribution. Jonah, indeed, is stuck.³⁸⁵

Yahweh continues to work with Jonah in the next episode, but through a different, more experiential, approach. The previous episode left off with Yahweh's asking Jonah if the evil "burning" in him was good. One might rephrase this as "Is it good to be angry?" or "Does it feel good to be burning with anger?" Jonah did not answer Yahweh's question regarding his anger, but instead removed himself from the city to "see" what develops at a distance. Tribble points out that the verb used here "to see" contrasts Jonah with the deity.³⁸⁶ Earlier on in the narrative, God "saw" (with the same verb as Jonah "sees", i.e., *wayyar*) what the Ninevites did and the deity "changed his mind" and "drew away from his anger" (3.9). Jonah now sits to "see" (3.10) (as if playing God), though Jonah, unlike Yahweh, sits there "burning." Jonah is not yet able to change his mind about Nineveh, and he is unable to turn from his anger. Jonah feebly builds a hut from where he watches, giving the impression that he is sulking like a frustrated child in the corner, insisting that the world is unfair.

Verse six tells that God caused a *qiqayon* plant to grow over Jonah's head to provide him shade "and to deliver him from his evil." Jonah was "absolutely delighted over the plant." For one day, God's "divine" plant enabled Jonah to experience something positive, and perhaps get a feeling of comfort. God induced a momentary, if superficial, "turning" for Jonah, through an equally superficial scenario. The following morning, however, God sends a worm to destroy the plant; it dies, and then God sends a fierce east wind while the sun,

³⁸⁵ Tribble discusses this portion as illustrating Jonah's self-centeredness, especially through his justification of past actions, and the overuse of the pronouns "I", "me" or "my", which occur nine times in this short opening. See Tribble, 201-203.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 206.

once again, beats down upon Jonah's head. The text continues: "As the sun pounded on Jonah's head, he swooned and, longing to die, he thought, 'Death is better for me than life.'"

To this point all evil has been dispelled except for the evil that is in Jonah, and in this section of the narrative Yahweh attempts for the last time to open up an alternative mindset and, indeed, deliver Jonah from his evil and his consistent desire to stay, stubbornly, in his comfort zone, both physically and mentally. The scorching sun is the spotlight turned on high upon Jonah, mirroring his internal state. Burning questions loom, and Jonah wants to collapse under the heat. Yahweh again asks: "Is the burning to you good about the plant?" Again Jonah responds, "It is good-- it burns me unto death."

Commentaries have spent much effort to try and determine a fitting explanation for the lesson Yahweh is trying to teach Jonah here, but none seem to quite take hold. The repetition of certain words such as burning, evil, deliverance, and shade, give a clue as to where meaning lies in this episode. Out of the ordinary is also the emergence of Jonah's "delight" with the plant—the first time such an emotion enters into the story, not to mention an emotion that is radically different from Jonah's typical attitude of despair. On one level, I propose that the *qiqayon* is an allegory of Jonah himself who is being eaten alive by the evil within him (i.e., the worm). Being consumed by this worm, the plant, a miracle of God, meets a premature death and simply withers. One senses this is how Yahweh sees Jonah: as a miracle and a delight, who is nonetheless helpless in fighting the emotions that consume him.

As the plant may symbolize Jonah's potential, it is also symbolic of the "rise" of Nineveh, which Jonah is waiting to witness. In immediate response to hearing Jonah's proclamation earlier in the narrative, the king "rose" and sat himself on the dirt, in a sense foreshadowing the rise of the *qiqayon*. One might imagine that Yahweh "delights" in the flowering and flourishing of Nineveh as he would with all of his creatures, in the same way that Jonah delights in the miraculous growth of the plant. This imagery also suggests that when Yahweh's

creatures turn to evil, God himself burns as in 3.9, when the king of Nineveh asks whether repentance may cause God to “turn from the burning of his nostrils.” The withering of the plant is like one’s demise due to embroiling anger, and thus the deity causes Jonah literally to burn under the scorching sun of his own unwillingness to abandon evil. The delight, for God, is the rise and glory of his creatures, in which he has placed an enormous investment. The imagery here is that God cultivates his creatures and that they are capable of miraculous and immediate spurts of growth. Like the plant, though, the creatures are also fragile and will wither if something evil inside them takes over. Jonah’s return to his death-wish denotes that the plant did not accomplish its purpose. Jonah is “overturning” in the sense of destruction just like the *qiqayon*; he is not overturning into deliverance like Nineveh.

Yahweh’s lesson and question to Jonah following the demise of the plant and Jonah’s return to his death-wish would seem to make sense in light of our interpretation. The text reads:

The Lord then said, “You yourself were fretting over the *qiqayon* plant, on which you did not labor, nor did you cultivate it, a plant that came up one night and perished the next; yet I myself am not to have compassion on Nineveh, that large city, where there are more than twelve myriads of human beings, who cannot discern between their right and left hands, and animals galore?” (4.10-11)

These are the last verses of the book, leaving the reader hanging on a question that they must also answer for themselves. How are we “seeing” the “overturning” of Nineveh? This is also asking whether one can appreciate the deliverance and rise of one’s rival, perhaps even knowing that this rival will cause destruction to one’s self or nation down the road. God is showing Jonah’s hypocrisy to himself through the plant. The spotlight is also burning on the heads of all who may be charged with renouncing the cycle of mimetic rivalry, the

idolatry of an unyielding retributive theology, and put simply, having mercy on one's enemies.

Yahweh's motivation for delivering Nineveh must not erroneously be construed as a result of Nineveh's repentance, though; this, too, would limit God to being in reaction to human behavior. Yahweh here does not mention that he delivered the Ninevites because of their cessation of violence, throwing a wrench in how one might understand the narrative's earlier episode. If Jonah was stuck in the rigid dogma of a tit-for-tat theology in which Nineveh's evil should have caused their demise; neither should we be caught in a tit-for-tat theology in which Nineveh's repentance caused their deliverance. If one construes God as a divine change-machine, then one is no more than an idolater. The divine, indeed, is not a creature run by mimesis, and may not be subject to "causation" by human beings; rather, the divine reveals himself as a free, spontaneous and creative force, moved by compassion for the creatures whose flourishing is a great delight. There is no movement within a set structure—there is no question about whether Nineveh should die so that Israel may live. There is no question about whether Nineveh should die so that Jonah's reputation as a prophet might be saved. There is no measuring, even, of Nineveh's penitence and whether they merit salvation. What does exist is an opening of the heart—the desire to be merciful and delight in the flourishing of human beings. In the end, it might have been the Ninevites' whimsical vulnerability that moved the divine to save. There is no formula; but there is a positive contagion between our human and divine parties.

The question at the end of the book of Jonah, therefore, seems to be: can we give up engagement in mimetic rivalry? Can we give up believing in our own sacrificial mentality instead of in the creative dynamism and freedom of God? Can we give up these forms of rigidity, idolatry and violence? This is a "burning" question—and not just for Jonah. Can we give up the thought that Nineveh should die so that Israel might live? Can we relinquish the idea that Nineveh should die so that Jonah may be justified as a prophet? Can one release the

need to sacrifice a living being, a one for the many, for salvation? Can we sacrifice all mental constructions of substitution and sacrifice?

The *qiqayon* plant seems clear in its message that something only dies when it is eaten away from the inside. Nineveh's violence was certainly eating away at their opportunity for life. And Jonah is withering in his inability to disengage from his binary mental model that keeps "Israel" and "Other" (Nineveh) in silos, insisting that the two cannot successfully and peacefully co-exist and be blessed. Yahweh, too, is "Other" for Jonah—a being that he still thinks can be evaded or blamed—despite ample evidence to the contrary. Jonah is caught up in a mimetic rivalry no different from the sets of brothers we know from Genesis who vie against each other for their father's birthright and blessing. Jonah has not learned the meaning of the Birkhat ha-Banim—that, indeed, there are two blessings, one for each brother; and indeed blessings likewise for Nineveh and Israel. Neither does Jonah recognize that Nineveh is indeed Israel's brother—no different from the Hebrews before the covenant was made with Yahweh. The inability of Jonah to forgive Nineveh's moral failure is like condemning Israel's own childhood.

The dissertation to this point, however, has demonstrated that even in the context of seeming non-violence, *something* must die. Interpreting the book of Jonah on its own as well as in the context of Yom Kippur, it is clear that the only way forward is to sacrifice the mentality, and the violence of sacrifice itself. If violence and sacrificial structures, which are grounded in fear, rivalry and substitution (e.g. Nineveh for Israel, or Israel for Nineveh, or any sense of vicarious sacrifice), persist, humanity will burn up and wither away from its own internalized violence. As comical as Nineveh's repentance may seem in our imaginations, with animals galore dressed up in sackcloth and perhaps even praying, they provide a happy ending that is so unusual in biblical literature, (and indeed in reality, too). The episode is coincidentally very similar to our narrative from Genesis of Ephraim and Manasseh. Like Ephraim and Manasseh, the Ninevites provide no conflict to drive the tale on. The conflict is in fact (and

always has been) with Jonah. We are left at this junction in an ongoing narrative with Jonah who must decide if he will sacrifice his old patterns of thought and behavior—his evil inclination—and relinquish the need for rivalry, conflict, anger, and other forms of violence, or if he will not. And he must decide now. Only then will his free, peaceful and happy ending be possible. Or he can choose to remain in the structure of Esther, where violence and scapegoating provide the immutable law of interrelating.³⁸⁷ This, too, is the choice put before the reader who may well sit, as Jonah, immobile and angry, just waiting to see what happens.

The Trans-Liturgical Function of Jonah: Towards the Opening of the Heart

Perhaps a true benefit of reading biblical scripture is that there is always a different interpretation than one's initial interpretation that is possible. The equivocality of biblical narratives is what lends them to relevance in every era, and to a wisdom that comes from opening up a multiplicity of perspectives. As Yahweh may be understood to express creative and spontaneous acts of freedom, so does the text that speaks knowledge of the deity. This equivocality in the text is necessary to avoid the trappings of idolizing our own thoughts about God. In the end, for example, God rewards Nineveh neither for their repentance (*quid pro quo*), nor out of sheer compassion (spontaneous generosity)--- but indeed as the result of both. Any attempt to lock an interpretation in will be met with a different interpretation.

Jonah's struggles in the text illustrate clearly the difficulty that comes with rigidity of thought, both in relation to the deity and to others. Three models of thought, in fact, come through the reading of the book of Jonah, as I have

³⁸⁷ The benefits of this interpretation for a peaceful and united humanity are clear though it presents certain issues given the Jewish people and their historical oppression and exile. We are thus caught between what is perhaps the "ideal" of Jonah and the "reality" of Esther—and must refrain from downplaying, and worse denying, the reality of scapegoating and victimage in the history of Jews and other groups. This interpretive problem will be addressed more thoroughly in the afterword to this dissertation.

outlined above: 1) the sailors who are aware of their own violence yet succumb to the scapegoat mechanism and sacrificial religion (conveying the full Girardian arc that produces the pagan sacred); 2) the Ninevites who in word and deed renounce all (literal) sacrifice and evil and achieve immediate reconciliation with the deity; and 3) Jonah who is unaware of his own sacrificial mentality and burns in his struggle when confronted with an interaction that does not conform to his own rigid theology. On the holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, it seems reading the book of Jonah may hold up a mirror to help one assess one's own structure of consciousness and, in particular, to reflect the damage that a sacrificial mentality brings on oneself and one's relationships.

The reading of the book itself is commanded as an act to be performed in the late afternoon of the holy day, right before the break of the fast. Like the reading of the Torah through the liturgical year, and the reading of the book of Esther on Purim, the reading of Jonah in itself is an act that brings with it merit. As Michael Fishbane remarks,

We should not miss...the powerful claim of a culture for which study was the great ritual par excellence... Indeed, in Rabba's mind, it would seem, the role of actual sacrifices was thoroughly transcended: one who studies them has no need of sacrificial offerings—for Torah-study is efficacious in its own right.³⁸⁸

The reading of Jonah itself, then, like the reading of the Torah in general, is considered a true religious substitute for animal sacrifice. But this is not a substitutionary metaphor in the sense of a substitute or ritual "victim," for what, in the end, is sacrificed as the result of our study? If I have read these texts correctly (at least in the Girardian sense, but I have intended in the Jewish sense as well), then only the sacrificial mentality must die. Even if temple sacrifices were (and to some still are) considered holy within the context of the history of

³⁸⁸ Michael Fishbane, "Aspects of the Transformation of Sacrifice in Judaism," in Ann Astell and Sandor Goodhart, eds., *Sacrifice, Scripture, & Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 128.

Judaism, the rise of the command to *read about* sacrifice instead of literally sacrifice is in itself an anti-sacrificial command. Jonah, therefore, liturgically as well as literarily, is, like our other vaccines, anti-sacrificial. Jonah addresses not just the rote behaviors that come from a sacrificial mentality and a ritualized religion, but the structures of thought that lay beneath them.

The Day of Atonement is actually preceded by a period of 10 days that are known as the Days of Awe in Jewish tradition, days focused on forgiveness and the renouncing of rivalry. The mood of the whole ten days is one of repentance. According to Rabbi Sharon Brous, the Days of Awe are:

the time of year where Jews and non-Jews are judged in the scales of good and evil, but the theme is, as we say in the second prayer of the day, that we can avert the evil decree by various acts. So it's very much in keeping with the Jewish notion that it's not just a matter of God's grace, but a matter of human energy. Men and women hurt each other, we do bad things, but men and women can repair the damage they've caused.³⁸⁹

The emphasis here is on human responsibility—these days are focused on relationships—how one has been in relationships, and seeking and bestowing forgiveness where it is needed. In the end, it is humankind's responsibility to make these efforts for, in Judaism, divine forgiveness is not a substitute for human forgiveness. Humans are responsible for reconciling with themselves.

The Days of Awe directly follow the Jewish celebration of the New Year, *Rosh Ha-Shana*, as well, and liturgically imply that humankind is typically, at the end of every annual cycle, asleep in their ways with a need to be reawakened. The blowing of the *shofar*, or ram's horn, is a ritual designed to awaken those who have fallen into an automatic routine: "The blowing of the shofar is not pretty. It is meant to be loud and harsh—a real wake-up call. It is blown to wake

³⁸⁹ Sharon Brous, interviewed by Krista Tippett, *Days of Awe Radio Show/Podcast* (September 2, 2010), accessed March 2012, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/days-awe/82>.

you up and tell you that you really can transform your life—for example, how you relate to your mother, or what kind of mother you have been.”³⁹⁰ The focus is both inward and outward. Following this wake up call and the repentance sought amongst human beings during the Days of Awe, falls Yom Kippur, during which one hears the book of Jonah, and may become aware of the kind of violence that has been residing in their interrelations. There are several rituals on this High Holy Day that work in an orchestral manner to support anti-violence and self-control, subduing the yetzer ha-ra, and reconciliation with the other. Fasting is one practice, and one external way of eliminating automatic behaviors and turning focus inward—fasting induces bodily discomfort to awaken us viscerally to our physical routines. Fasting always reminds me of a quote my grandmother had taped to our refrigerator growing up: “Eat to live, do not live to eat.” The reading of Jonah, as an enjoinder to fasting, induces our emotional discomfort by asking how far we are willing to open our heart to compassion. Overall, Yom Kippur may be a day of discomfort.

Fasting and reading alone do not create the equivalent blessing, though, and even as such can fall into automatic and empty ritualism. The rabbis, like the biblical prophets, have put emphasis on the state of the heart over empty practice, too; they assert one must analyze what is in the heart. The *Mishna Ta’anit*, for example, acknowledges the sacrificial practices of the community, but “corrects” these practices, stating instead the importance of anti-sacrificial deeds as exemplified by the Book of Jonah. The Mishna “describes the communal fasting in ancient Palestine and the homiletic centrality of the Book of Jonah intended to inculcate a sense of guilt and contrition, motivate the populace to mend their behavior and thereby appease God.”³⁹¹ The Mishnah portion reads as follows:

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Levine, 8.

This is the order of service for fast days. The ark is taken out to the city square. Wood ashes are placed on the ark, on the head of the *Nasi*, and on the head of the *Ab Bet Din*. Everyone else places ashes on his own head. The elder among them addresses them, with words of admonition, saying ‘Our brethren, scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, “And God saw their sack-cloth and their fasting,” but rather, “And God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way (Jon. III.10).”’³⁹²

According to this passage, the religious leaders, the people, even the Torah Ark, are brought into the public square and humiliated by the elder, who scolds them for practicing superficial rituals. Interestingly, one can see the impetus for this in two lights. One: it is possible to understand this anti-ritualism in the context of Nineveh as having feigned their repentance (as certain strands in the Yerushalmi indicate), emphasizing the importance for Israel to repent in a genuine way. In this context, Nineveh would be an anti-example. Or two: it is possible to pick up on the positive Bavli midrashim on Nineveh that laud the nation for its anti-sacrificial and authentic return to God. The second possibility seems likely here, following the Bavli’s general acceptance of Nineveh as a paradigm for repentance, especially as the verses indicate divine acceptance of their deeds.³⁹³ But either way, it seems a drama enacted, if you will, to ritually make the point against ritual! This is an anti-ritual ritual of sorts in which the admonishment against ritual is indeed part of the ritual.

The Jewish Theological Seminary further comments on Mishna Ta’anit:

In the agriculture-based economy of ancient Israel, any delay of the winter rains was experienced not only as a hardship, but as a rebuke from heaven. When the rainy season progressed without precipitation, the sages would declare a series of public fasts of increasing severity to demonstrate repentance to God. This mishnah is quite extraordinary. The most dignified object and the

³⁹² *Mishnah Ta’anit*, II.1.

³⁹³ A reason for why Nineveh’s authentic repentance was likely the more popular interpretation as well. Otherwise, one would have a divine who was fooled by their act.

most dignified leaders are humbled by the placement of ash upon them. Yet even such dramatic demonstrations did not suffice. The elder would appeal to the people not to let external demonstrations suffice, but to repent within.³⁹⁴

The JTS commentary may not have latched on to the irony inherent in setting up this anti-ritual drama. It is noteworthy, however, that this commentary again stresses authentic repentance and forgiveness even (and especially) in the midst of crisis; and the Ninevites in Jonah are used as models for behavior.

As the Jewish Theological Seminary commentary *does* indicate, the fasts grew more intense the longer the crisis. The Mishna states that with the onset of the crisis scholars would fast first, then if rain did not fall, the entire community took on fasting. If rain still did not fall, the community fasted still, with increasing restrictions such as ceasing to bathe, engage in marital relations, and work. If the drought continued still, commerce was slowed down and social affairs delayed. In essence, the rabbis slowed society down as drought persisted—minimizing social interactions, and reinforcing introspection and self-control. One might also understand the fasts as helping those in the drought literally minimize their food consumption—thereby minimizing and/or eliminating competition for scarce goods. Taking the anti-ritual focus on the integrity of one's heart, coupled with the strict physical and communal measures to ensure self-control and social regulation, I assert that what we have is a powerful recipe to prevent the mimetic contagion that Girard pinpoints as so dangerous in the wake of a crisis.

This early usage of the book of Jonah cannot be underestimated in its contribution to the field of Girard studies. This example of how the book of Jonah was used in ancient Judaism is a direct counter and alternative to how the typical “pagan” ‘persecution text’ defines communal response to crisis. Girard’s analysis of the persecution text, to recall, begins with a communal crisis—often a natural disaster, religious dissent, etc. It is in the midst of the crisis that social order

³⁹⁴ “Mishnat Hashavua: Ta’anit 2:1,” accessed September 12, 2012, http://www.jtsa.edu/Conservative_Judaism/JTS_Torah_Commentary/Mishnah_Taanit.xml?ss=pri.

breaks down into chaos, a feeling of *sameness* becoming pervasive, mimetic snowballing causing the pace to pick up, intensifying competition and violence. The chaos of this mimetic rivalry creates the Hobbesian all-against-all in which any possibility for introspection is replaced with irrational zeal, turning eventually into an all-against-one in the creation of a scapegoat, the sacrifice of the scapegoat “saving” society (e.g. Oedipus, Appolonius, et. al.).

The Mishna Ta’anit, in contrast to the “pagan” response, states that chaos, and typical fear and survival responses such as competition and violence, are not, in fact, a foregone conclusion. The Mishna Ta’anit declares that in response to a crisis, one must fast and analyze one’s heart—in addition, from a very practical perspective, one is to regulate availability of goods and social interactions. In the midst of crisis, therefore, the rabbis assert a practice of active resistance to the pull of mimetic desire and the chaos that would inevitably ensue. The rabbis, quelling competitive impulses, instill practices of extreme self-control and introspection. One might imagine, too, that in time of drought, there would be a shortage of food. The religious response of fasting to a food shortage is quite remarkable, replacing what must have been rampant feelings of fear and scarcity with a sense of responsibility, control over oneself, and faith in one’s own ability to “turn” God’s heart in response to one’s own repentance. The Ninevites’ repentance in the book of Jonah is the prime example of how even the most evil of communities can turn away from violence and live.

The Mishnah continues to state what kinds of acts should be forsaken to obtain mercy: “the ritualistic blowing of the ram’s horn, formal prayer, public humiliation of community leaders, symbolic banishment of the Torah ark and public fasting.”³⁹⁵ It is curious and significant that these named rituals include aspects of public humiliation and expulsion—attributes Girard has distinguished as typical to the ritual preparation of scapegoats. Indeed, in the cultic practice of ancient Israel, the high priest often was the person who took on the sin of the community, performing sacrifices to purify and expunge guilt. The Mishna here

³⁹⁵ Levine, 8.

“corrects” these rituals; when faced with pestilence, drought, or a plague, the Mishna is declaring that one must no longer, in effect, ritually scapegoat. There is no need to expel sin, or project or recast blame. Rather, one must demonstrate one’s turning from sin in one’s deeds. Targum Jonah amplifies and emphasizes the text of the biblical scripture to underscore the Ninevites’ turn from evil and acts of personal repentance. As Lamentations 3.41 declares: “Let us lift up our heart *with our hands* unto God in the heavens.”³⁹⁶ Letting evil fall away from one’s hands, (hands are understood to be the tools of violence), and using hands instead to embrace the heart, is the inner type of “return” or repentance that is sought. There is no sacrifice, public display, public humiliation, or expulsion involved. There is no transfer of blame. It is literally and simply an act of return. The emphasis in Targum Jonah makes it clear that this was the common message in ancient Judaism—the message for all people.

The notion of return (*t’shuvah*) is central to Judaism in general, and is the pivotal idea that came to take center stage on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Examples of what it means to return to God occur, for example, in Deut. 4.30 and 30.2; Isa. 10.21 and 19.22; Jer. 4.1. This doctrine holds that man can at any time return and be accepted by God. “The simplicity of this idea is deceptive...What the Hebrew tradition stresses is not the mere state of mind, the repentance, but the act of return.”³⁹⁷ Thus the Book of Jonah is read in synagogues on the Day of Atonement, relaying how the king of Nineveh called on his people “to return, every man, from his evil way and from the violence on his hands.”³⁹⁸ Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrians who had conquered the kingdom of Israel, laid waste Samaria, and led the ten tribes away into destruction. Yet “when God saw what they did, how they returned from their evil

³⁹⁶ Quoted from Levine, 8.

³⁹⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kauffman (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 36.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

way, God repented of the evil that he had said he would do to them and did it not.”³⁹⁹

Interestingly, Kauffman, who translates Buber’s *I and Thou*, considers the New Testament and points out that:

the theology of Paul is founded on the implicit denial of this doctrine...Paul’s elaborate argument concerning the impossibility of salvation under the Torah and for the necessity of Christ’s redemptive death presuppose that God cannot simply forgive anyone who simply returns. If the doctrine of return is true, Paul’s theology collapses and ‘Christ died in vain.’...Man stands in a direct relationship to God and requires no mediator.⁴⁰⁰

The book of Jonah does support this view, and the Ninevites are forgiven directly by God, in a powerful message that lacks even a glint of literal sacrifice or mediation. If in fact there can never be a pure structure in which all violence ceases, though, what then would die? As chapter 4 of Jonah seems to relate, perhaps the only ones banished, in this new model, are those like Jonah who struggle against it.

The content of the Book of Jonah thus supports the earliest liturgical function of Jonah as a model to “return” in the midst of crisis. This function, if you will, has sustained itself until today in the context of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is itself a crisis, if you will—it is the day when all souls are up for grabs. Perhaps the charge of Yom Kippur has been lost in practice over the years, but one can imagine that in the early years of Judaism, Yom Kippur was truly a day of reckoning—one would make it into the Book of Life, or one would not. How one responds to this crisis may be of the utmost importance.

As mentioned above, the book of Jonah, not coincidentally, is read in the late afternoon—it is the last reading before one leaves temple to break the fast.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 37.

One is at one's most vulnerable at this time—having already fasted for almost 24 hours. The last thing one wants at this point during the fast is to be told that external demonstrations are trite—and what really matters is the state of one's heart. And yet this is what the rituals of Yom Kippur all set out to accomplish—fasting, wearing uncomfortable clothing, and refraining from typical activities, like an extended Sabbath observance, are there to ensure that we take ourselves off of autopilot. The rigidity of ideology and the rote reversion into a sacrificial theology, cannot be sustained during the days focused on forgiveness and mercy for *all* people with whom one is at odds. Jonah cannot be in a healthy relationship with God, indeed, until he “overturns” his relationship with Nineveh. Jonah has made an idol of the sacrificial structure itself, which can only reconcile through violence and the finding of something, or someone to blame. And when Jonah is unable to cast out another, he casts out himself. It is the reading and study of the anti-sacrificial sacrifices in Jonah on Yom Kippur that correspondingly provides an anti-ritual ritual in the midst of traditional practice.

On the most sacred and serious of all holidays, indeed, we read of a prophet who snores through a storm and an “evil” nation who tenderly dresses their animals in sackcloth. This is an absurd world indeed that Jonah depicts. But perhaps it is through this very absurdity one might glimpse the creativity, peace and freedom that are possible when violence is abandoned. What will replace exactly it cannot be known, but it seems worth the effort. So as one's stomach burns with hunger on this holiday, one struggles with Jonah. Yesterday's “solution,” in the Book of Esther, was good enough—it lay in utilizing the scapegoat mechanism to transfer the target to another party, and thereby get the target off of oneself. The Jews in Esther were momentarily saved, though I maintain that the overarching hermeneutic of the book denies any attempt to be proud of the manner in which this salvation is achieved. What we have in Jonah addresses this problem of method head on. What we have in Jonah is a more precise critique of the mechanism itself, and Jonah's inability to escape from the vicious persistence of its influence. Nothing that exists within the realm of sacrificial and competition-based thinking will save according to the wisdom of

this book; it is not the *quid pro quo* of an act of retaliation as we have in Esther. Rather, it is beginning a new cycle free of the mentality of the past, based on the future—based on mercy—based on a free, creative mind that acts accordingly, chooses life, and forgives.

CHAPTER 5

Simple “Scripts” and Positive Mimesis: Girard’s Shaky Foundation of the World?

It is in light of the analyses of the three previous chapters that we must now return to the seeming problem of mimesis and what humanity might be able to do to create a future that is not of the same violent mold. To this point, the dissertation has provided detailed arguments to illustrate two different types of vaccines. The first type of vaccine is more traditional in that it attempts to control and prevent a rampant disease through administering a dose of the poison; we have distinguished heretofore that the commandment to read certain violent texts of the Tanakh are ways to inoculate us against negative mimetism, and thereby build up immunity. The book of Esther as a whole was one example of this. This more traditional type of vaccine will build up immunity to violence in the human system over time through gradual and deepening self-awareness. But this traditional vaccine will not be able to provide an alternative structure to replace the outmoded sacrificial one.

The second type of vaccine will therefore be the focal point of this chapter. The second type of vaccine is what I have called the “peace” vaccine, which is less a remedy to disease than a proactive tonic. I have argued that certain narrative actions herein, namely the Birkhat ha-Banim and the repentance of Nineveh, represent examples of the peace vaccines that model this new type of human behavior.⁴⁰¹ It is my assertion that these peace vaccines are, in fact,

⁴⁰¹ I have also asserted that, while we might each need to reckon with our own “evil inclinations” to get to peace, this would indeed be the only type of “sacrifice” found in these proactive examples; otherwise, these examples have no violence in them. The Birkhat ha-Banim

examples of what Girard has called “positive mimesis” or, alternatively, “innermost mediation.” It is therefore time to delineate how Girard explains this notion of positive mimesis, and how the examples in this dissertation correlate.

Before moving on to positive mimesis, however, there are a few other types of narrative actions that have emerged out of this study and that require some systemization. These narrative actions are a bit different from our vaccines; they are more like straightforward prescriptions, simple “scripts,” that are used in conjunction with the vaccines for optimal health. These scripts are implemented to reestablish order (physiological, biological, sociological or otherwise) through *controlling* an already in progress mimetic crisis. Unlike our traditional vaccines, then, they are implemented after the onset of crisis, and they try to alleviate the occurring crisis in an organized manner (like a prescription antibiotic, hence my calling them “scripts.”) As such, they are also distinguished from peace vaccines. As this discussion progresses, we will see that peace vaccines by their very nature, in fact, defy standardization or ritualization. These scripts, on the other hand, seem to be repeatable, systematic ways to respond to the disease of mimesis. While our “simple scripts” are thus pretty straightforward, our peace vaccines fall under the more complex category of “positive mimesis” or “innermost mediation.”⁴⁰²

There are thus two kinds of “medicine” to cover in this chapter: 1) simple scripts for curtailing mimetic rivalry and crisis, focusing on regaining order and control; and 2) positive mimesis (also known as “innermost mediation”), which focuses on generating a new paradigm proactively. The Hebrew texts, in their often-considered practicality, will I hope add value for regulating mimetic desire, intervening in conflict, and building positive mimesis, thereby filling a broad gap in providing practical (and Jewish, though not exclusively so) solutions within the primarily theoretical Girardian scholarship. Some of the scripts and examples of

and the repentance of Nineveh are anti-sacrificial vaccines meant to enculturate our system into a new, healthy, and peaceful mode of being.

⁴⁰² Though to this point in the dissertation I relied most heavily on Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, it is necessary to bring two of Girard’s other works, namely *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and *Battling to the End*, into this discussion for the valuable information they hold concerning Girard’s exposition of mediation and mimesis. These two additional works will be considered below.

vaccines below may be particular to Judaism, but many of them can span traditions, and may also be pertinent to the secular life.

Simple Scripts for Curtailing Mimetic Rivalry

It seems apparent from our exegeses in this dissertation that instructions for curtailing mimetic rivalry emerge out of the texts we have covered, in particular Esther and Jonah. Once a mimetic rivalry has taken hold, Girard has adeptly pointed out, (and this author affirms), that a period of mimetic snowballing tends to occur, leading to a mimetic crisis that is typically diffused by an act of scapegoating violence. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we have seen three different examples of mimetic crises, and may now point out the various practices that one can use to help navigate these highly charged situations. In these texts we find striking similarities in terms of how communities of any kind can effectively respond to crisis. What we find in these texts is also counter to what the western cultural imagination typically teaches, as I will discuss in some detail. So what are these biblical prescriptions? What do our characters do? There are four essential practices:

1) A call for fasting

In the Book of Esther, Esther faces a situation of a community of Jews being prepared for extermination. This situation could very easily lend itself to a period of chaos and confusion. To offset any mimetic frenzy, Esther calls for a fast, which will bring self-control to the foreground both mentally and physically. Communal fasting also unites the group such that internal rivalries do not tear the people apart in this time of high emotions. Esther, in addition, redirects their attention off of their possible (even probable) future and onto God.

In terms of ritual, fasting is prescribed both on Purim and on Yom Kippur. Both holidays, each in its own way, represent a life or death crisis, Purim of the body and Yom Kippur of the spirit. As discussed, fasts were also prescribed alongside the Book of Jonah in times of natural disaster, averting the violence that would come from competing for scarce goods. Fasting instills community solidarity and self-control amid crisis times, and even controls the use of limited resources.

2) Slowing the action down

Fasting may be one way to also slow the action down to regain control over mimetic impulses. Another technique we saw to accomplish this came out of the Book of Jonah. When the sailors cast lots that fell on Jonah, an unusual period of questioning began right in the midst of their ship being tossed about. The sailors wanted to know all about Jonah, who he was, where he had come from. They deliberately took time to learn about him and to figure out what they could possibly do to settle the crisis peacefully. Questions specifically are not necessary here, but in general what seems required is communication to slow down the activity in the midst of crisis. A rational approach must be taken to try and understand each person and each situation. Slowing the action down and taking time to communicate is a second way to make good, informed choices, and prevent irrational mimetic violence.

3) Enjoining the whole community in the effort

We saw this technique in both Esther's calling the communal fast and in the sailors' questioning Jonah. The community, especially in our Jonah example, works together toward the same goal. Most important here is the example of the sailors' enjoining Jonah in fixing the problem. While they know Jonah to be the

source of the problem, they actively engage him to be a part of the solution. They do not cast blame; they count on him to contribute to a remedy.

Another example of communal effort is illustrated through the actions of the Ninevites, who even enjoin their animals in repentance. The Ninevites, like the sailors, do not blame or create a scapegoat to wipe away their sin. As a community they take on the project of repentance immediately, and together. The king of Nineveh calls upon his city for this effort and it is accomplished.

4) Reading and hearing scripture

Reading scripture is part of the liturgical practice of each holy day we have brought to this study—the Sabbath, Purim and Yom Kippur. The practice of reading scripture and hearing scripture is a direct remedy for the yetzer ha-ra according to the rabbis, who enjoin Jews to “Get thee to the schoolhouse!” In chapter two, it is stated:

Whether the death of Ephraim (or the Messiah ben Joseph) is meant to be actual or symbolic, the result is meant to be a psychic transformation, redemption, and deliverance from our own human nature, from our evil inclination. In order for transformation to occur, it seems there still has to be a sacrifice—whether literal or otherwise. And, importantly, the means of offering this sacrifice is through study of the Torah. Torah is both the vehicle and the antidote.

According to this dissertation’s analysis, the very act of *hearing* the Torah on the Jewish holy days is a way to re-vaccinate oneself against the forces of negative mimesis.

The reading and study of scripture is finally emphasized in the history of Judaism as a substitute for sacrifice itself. After the destruction of the Second Temple, literal sacrifices were replaced by the reading of the Torah. The reading

of Torah becomes even more efficacious as a means of atonement than any number of literal sacrifices performed together.⁴⁰³ Thus reading scripture, studying scripture, and hearing the message of scripture are commandments and acts of atonement. Reading the Torah, for Jews, is like interfacing with the divine—it provides the vehicle for reconnecting with the will of God so that the individual ego may be diminished. Connecting with the will of God *is* returning from our journey into our own thoughts, and quelling mimetic inclinations that lead to negative rivalry. This is the message of the Torah, as this dissertation has shown, and so the Torah commands the reading of itself in order to receive its words.

Summary

While these four prescriptive actions to quell crisis situations and the escalation of mimetic frenzy toward violence may seem trite, it is significant that they go against the grain of human instinct. In situations of crisis what would be predictable is a Girardian-type escalation—either, for example, scurrying for goods in case of natural disaster, or perhaps retaliatory mob vengeance in return for violence. These prescriptions, therefore, while seemingly quite simple, go against the grain and break human force of habit.

Right now is in fact an extraordinary time to live and write about these prescriptive actions. Just a few weeks ago, in August of 2013, there was an alleged use of chemical weapons on civilians in Syria. Current President of the United States, Barak Obama, was considering an immediate retaliatory strike to, essentially, teach Syria a lesson, and also, presumably, to uphold the moral standard of the United States in world affairs. But he chose a different course of action. Obama has taken a highly unique course, in fact. Instead of making the unilateral decision to retaliate, which was within his purview as President, he called congress into session to debate and vote on whether or not to take the

⁴⁰³ See Fishbane, “Aspects of the Transformation of Sacrifice in Judaism,” 114-139.

military action. While immediate action was thought to be necessary, Obama was assured military action, if mandated, would be just as effective in one week from now. What Obama effectively did was as follows: 1) he slowed down the process to allow time for reflection and conversation; 2) he involved the entire community in making the decision; and 3) he and congress will research and refer to “scripture” (i.e., the constitution) to inform their decision-making. I agree with Amy Davidson who wrote the following for *The New Yorker* magazine:

This may be the first sensible step that Obama has taken in the Syrian crisis, and may prove to be one of the better ones of his Presidency—even if he loses the vote, as could happen. Politically, he may have just saved his second term from being consumed by Benghazi-like recriminations and spared himself Congressional mendacity about what they all might have done.⁴⁰⁴

Obama essentially slowed down a would-be mimetic crisis, and prevented others from making him a scapegoat.

Pope Francis took different, similarly relevant action in response to the Syrian crisis. Pope Francis, slowing down and reorienting global response to Syria in his own way, called for a global day of fasting during which he stated: “Violence and war lead only to death, they speak of death!...As if it were normal, we continue to sow destruction, pain, death!”⁴⁰⁵ Francis continued: “At this point I ask myself: Is it possible to change direction? Can we get out of this spiral of sorrow and death? Can we learn once again to walk and live in the ways of peace?” And then as if calling the nations to be as Nineveh, he implored: “Each one of us, from the least to the greatest, including those called to govern nations, to respond: Yes, we want it!” Significantly, Francis also shed his ceremonial

⁴⁰⁴ Amy Davidson, “Going to Congress: Obama’s Best Syria Decision,” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2013, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/closerread/2013/08/going-to-congress-obamas-best-syria-decision.html>.

⁴⁰⁵ This quote and the following from Philip Pulella, “Pope, in Syria Peace Appeal, Calls for End of Spiral of Death,” accessed September 8, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/07/us-syria-crisis-pope-idUSBRE9860G120130907>, Vatican City, September 7, 2013.

robes for the service calling for the fast. He wore instead a simple white garment. Pope Francis has understood the Book of Jonah's call to shed the violence from our hands. Playing the role of the king of Nineveh, he calls for the global renunciation of mimetic rivalry--- the global renunciation of the need to strike in vengeance. These biblically inspired actions, called forth by two current world leaders, bear witness to the concerted attempt to cease, or at least slow down, any movement toward mimetic violence. These simple "scripts" are how the Torah directs its readers to gain control of a crisis; they help to reinstate order when the human inclination would be to regress into chaos.

Positive Mimesis and Innermost Mediation

Curtailing the destructive inertia of a mimetic crisis is helped, as demonstrated, by the prescriptions set forth in the books of Esther and Jonah. These practical prescriptions seem simple, but were lacking from Girardian scholarship, with the one exception perhaps being the scholarship of Vern Redekop, whose work is focused on Girardian-inspired analysis of conflict and techniques for resolution.⁴⁰⁶ Models for demonstrating positive mimesis or *innermost mediation*, separately, are also sorely lacking. Positive mimesis, as distinct from the prescriptions above, are not quite a remedy to an existing crisis, but rather a creative and spontaneous act of goodness, love, and generosity, free from the constraints of the past or present circumstances or events.

Girard's most recent book, *Battling to the End* (2007/2010), might be considered the fullest exposition of his notion of "positive mimesis." Prior to *Battling to the End*, Girard admits that had been under the impression that the "universal knowledge of violence" alone would have been a sufficient contribution

⁴⁰⁶ Vern Neufeld Redekop, *A Hermeneutic of Deep-Rooted Conflict: An Exploration of Rene Girard's Theory of Mimetic Desire and Scapegoating and its Applicability to the Oka/Kanehsata:ke Crisis of 1990*, dissertation submitted for a Doctor of Philosophy in Theology for the University of Ottawa (1998). See also his book, *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of a Deep-rooted Conflict Can Open Paths of Reconciliation* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002).

to aid humanity in its progress; Girard had believed that the revelation of sacrificial violence would have been enough to inspire humankind's transformation.⁴⁰⁷ But in *Battling* Girard admits the need for a new structure that is deliberately anti-sacrificial, and positively mimetic.⁴⁰⁸ Thanks to the prodding of his interviewer, Benoit Chantre, Girard delves a bit deeper into what this remedy might look like.⁴⁰⁹ Based on Chantre's idea, Girard agrees on the term "innermost mediation" to describe what he sees as a possible way out of sacrificial existence.

Innermost mediation may be synonymous with what I and others have been calling "positive mimesis," but innermost mediation is only paradoxically mimetic: innermost mediation is only mimetic insofar as one imitates the intentional desire to *not* imitate or be imitated. Innermost mediation seems to be the being one achieves when fully connected to the free, creative, unrestricted, authentic, and divine presence within, rather than gaining being through any kind of social mimicking.⁴¹⁰ In order to really understand the complexity of innermost mediation, however, a brief summary of Girard's thought leading up to this most recent idea will be helpful. Let us then take a brief look at the evolution of Girard's thought with regard to the notion of "positive mimesis" or innermost

⁴⁰⁷ "This faith," says Girard, "in the necessary reconciliation of men is what shocks me most today." Girard, *Battling*, 10.

⁴⁰⁸ I must therefore disagree with Sandor Goodhart's post-*Battling* warning, which reads:

Kaptein asks the inevitable question: how do we go about finding a way out of this sacrificial crisis? This is an important move on Kaptein's part, and it highlights a very important feature of Girard's ideas, a feature often missed by a good many of the individuals who currently use Girard's ideas: namely, that there is no implied remedy. There is no ethical consequence to be gleaned from Girard's analysis, other than to end the violence, to *refuser la violence*.

See Sandor Goodhart, "The Self and Other People," in *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, Volume 7, Issue 16, Fall 2011, 14-25. Thank you to Ann W. Astell for bringing this to my attention.

⁴⁰⁹ A metaphorical prodding had been in place from the various authors and scholars who were looking for a remedy out of Girardian theory. In *Battling*, it seems Girard may have been responding to many of his followers' critiques. See, for example, Rebecca Adams, "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire," in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000).

⁴¹⁰ Girard uses a number of terms to describe the concept of innermost mediation including reverse mimetism, positive imitation, positive reciprocity, love, intelligent imitation, positive undifferentiation, identification, charity, empathy, and the imitation of Christ.

mediation (which, to be clear, I treat as synonymous terms.) Then we will come back around to describe innermost mediation in more detail, and how the “peace vaccines” of the Birkhat ha-Banim and the Ninevites’ repentance may correlate.

Mimetic desire, to review our initial definition from chapter one, describes how humans *acquire* being, and more specifically their very desire(s), from other human beings. No human being, in this paradigm, can desire anything autonomously; humans learn what to desire through imitation of others. On the surface, mimetic desire may look like a competition for objects—take, for example, the scenario of two children fighting over a toy; it may seem the children are in competition for the toy, but before the first child picks up the toy, the second child notably has no interest in it. It is only in imitation of the first child that the second child acquires his/her desire for the toy. This scenario, then, illustrates that the competition is not really for the object, but for the *being* the child possesses through having it. The second child therefore learns to desire the toy in imitation because they think this will lead to a fulfilling result.

For Girard, the above scenario illustrates how our lives mimetically take shape, and quite unconsciously so. Humans are run by imitative desire, which precludes any possibility that humans are in any way independent or autonomous. Mimetic theory “tends to relativize the very possibility of introspection: going into oneself always means finding the other, the mediator, the person who orients my desires without my being aware of it.”⁴¹¹ For Girard, human beings are deeply and unconsciously dependent upon one another; all of how we are is learned through mediating others (“models”) with whom we enter into relationship. Girard uses the term “interdividual” to describe how *who we are* is that we are mediated through others. So it is not that we simply imbibe the messages and values of our culture-at-large; the more powerful determining forces come from our one-on-one relationships with those we choose as “models” whom he alternatively calls “mediators” (as, sensibly, they function to mediate our desires).

⁴¹¹ Girard, *Battling*, 10.

Girard in fact begins the development of his theory of mimesis in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. In *Deceit*, he uses the term “mediation,” (the term mimesis does not come into play in Girard’s work until later), and he describes a few different ways that mediation occurs. Girard first describes what he calls “internal mediation,” which leads to the most intense rivalry. Internal mediation denotes desire mediated by models that are more or less similar to oneself—models that are of approximately, for example, the same age or ability—models with whom one readily identifies. Typical to internal mediation is also the subject’s perception of the model as possessing a kind of grandeur—a power; the model has a type of *being* that the subject wishes to have. This grandeur tends to initially get projected onto an object that the model possesses, hearkening back to the example of the two children fighting over the same toy. The competition over possession of the object creates a rivalry that intensifies the closer the subject comes to acquiring it. The model, now defending his possession, clings more fiercely to the object, reminding the subject of their inferiority, which makes the subject fixate even more intensely on the conquest. Through this process of intensification, the object is eventually forgotten and emptied of its meaning, and the rivalry between “mimetic doubles” is played out for the sake of the rivalry itself. According to Girard, internal mediation is inherently violent due to the intense rivalry it generates; it may culminate in a compelling metaphysical desire where the subject seeks to replace, and even literally *become* the other (i.e., the model.) These intense rivalries come from internal mediation precisely because the subject and the model are so similar; they embody the devolution into mimetic “twins,” creating a mimetic crisis that will be marked by violence. The metaphysical proximity of the subject and the model (in which there is no strict boundary separating them) is thus quite dangerous.

“External mediation” does not breed the same intensity of rivalry as internal mediation. Unlike internal mediation, external mediation may, in fact, be a successful kind of mimesis. This kind of mediation is when one’s desire is mediated through a remote, even transcendent figure; the mediator must be someone who is at a distance great enough removed from the subject that rivalry

is not sufficiently awakened. According to Girard, there must be an extant *metaphysical* distance; there must be a strict boundary between subject and object that retains their differentiation to ward off competition, as for example between a teacher and a student or a parent and child. (While a student may wish to become a teacher, it is something that will come *well into the future*, affirming a boundary of time. Graduate students with their teachers, however, are different and must be categorized as “internal” due to proximity.) In external mediation, the desires of the subject are still mediated through the external model, but their distance from each other is great enough to keep this relationship more or less safe from violence. On the down side, even if humans have powerful, good, and well-chosen external mediators, keeping rivalry mostly at bay, Girard seems to maintain that other proximal desires will inevitably creep in and create competition.

Girard’s notion of mediation in *Deceit* presents human beings, in general, as fundamentally interdividual. In this paradigm, human beings acquire all of their desires through mediation. Human beings can thus have no real inner fulfillment because their very being is only acquired from without; this keeps them in a vicious cycle of constantly seeking to fill their void through mediating models. Perhaps the greatest disintegration of the human being, discussed by Girard, is portrayed in Dostoevsky’s “Underground Man.” Caught in the web of multiple obsessive relationships, underground man’s “self” is fragmented beyond any recognition. He is aware of the mimetic web in which he is caught, too, but seems unable to break free.

While Dostoevsky’s underground man is tormented due to his utterly fragmented self, however, Girard presents *Notes from the Underground* as a literary masterpiece that contains transcendent knowledge of the human condition. The ability to create a novelistic masterpiece does not require a complete transformation; but it does require a depth of awareness of one’s own mediated condition. Girard states: “The victory over a self-centeredness which is other-centered, this renunciation of fascination and hatred, is the crowning

moment of novelistic creation.”⁴¹² This self-awareness is what Girard calls “creative renunciation.”⁴¹³ In creative renunciation, the novelists come to their own transformation through “denouncing their deceptive divinity of pride.”⁴¹⁴ Giving up the creation of false “gods” whether through aggrandizement of self or the model is what begins the novelist’s transformation.

Girard does elaborate on this idea in *Deceit* as well, distinguishing this state of awareness as being profoundly able to draw metaphysical boundaries. When one is able, for example, to maintain the integrity of the self, one can then appropriately acknowledge and identify with the Other. This boundary creates a healthy relatedness in place of human-to-human mediation, which collapses self and other, providing only distorted knowledge of both. This is, in fact, a very early version of Girard’s much later notion of innermost mediation, as we will see. But in *Deceit*, the way to engage in the process of innermost mediation is absent. In the novels he analyzes, Girard declares there to be:

a call for symbols of vertical transcendency whether the author is Christian or not. All the great novelists respond to this fundamental appeal but sometimes they manage to hide themselves from the meaning of their response.⁴¹⁵

The novels on which Girard writes are certainly adequate in revealing the mediating mechanism, and the problems of human desire and imitation. But while aspiring to an even higher revelation about the human condition, it seems this was the farthest the novelists could go.

These ideas of internal and external mediation are the foundation for what Girard later, in *V&S* and after, calls mimetic desire, as it is explicated above. Importantly, mimetic desire is now discussed in the context of religion, though, and not works of at least so-called secular literature. Within this context, Girard

⁴¹² Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 299.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

is able to relate mimetic desire to the foundation of religion; he is also able to articulate its antidote, which is very generally described as “positive mimesis,” the “imitation of Christ,” or more specifically the imitation of Jesus’ desire. But he does not elaborate on what this kind of alternative mimesis really entails in his works before *Battling*.⁴¹⁶

It is the time to come back, then, to how Girard *does* elaborate on what he means by the idea of the imitation of Christ in *Battling to the End*, and in his doing so, he is forced to negotiate how human mediation and mimetic desire works in more detail.⁴¹⁷ In *Battling*, Girard does, to be clear, adhere to his basic premise that humanity is headed toward an escalation to the extremes, or apocalyptic battle. Girard states:

We have to think of reconciliation not as a consequence but as the reverse of the escalation to the extremes. It is a real possibility, but no one wants to see it. The Kingdom is already here, but human violence will increasingly mask it. This is the paradox of our world.⁴¹⁸

Girard also asserts, “Christ will have tried to bring humanity into adulthood, but humanity will have refused. I am using the future perfect on purpose because there is a deep failure in all of this.”⁴¹⁹ In the context of Girard’s presumed failure of humankind, however, he states that some rare humans, (those he calls heroes and geniuses), have been able to accomplish a kind of “internal criticism of reciprocity,” even an “internal mutation” of mimetics.⁴²⁰ Girard states these tantalizing ideas at the beginning of his book, and Chantre has to tease the details out through the process of the book-long interview. As the book

⁴¹⁶ It is my impression as well that Girard becomes more skeptical about the ability of humanity once mediation becomes mimesis in the context of religion. The sacrificial structure seems to have a hold on humanity, for Girard, which will end in an all out battle.

⁴¹⁷ Chantre does a good job drawing out Girard’s thoughts on this topic, which I think otherwise Girard would have been happy to continue avoiding.

⁴¹⁸ Girard, *Battling*, 46.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 118.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 10. Ann W. Astell has offered the idea that this kind of internal mutation or internal criticism may, in fact, relate to the idea of conscience. Ann W. Astell, dissertation notes to author, (Indiana: Notre Dame University, December 20, 2013).

progresses, the topic is brought back into the fore on several occasions during which Girard uses a wide variety of different terms to describe what seems, for him, to be a reversal of the escalation to the extremes.⁴²¹ The overarching term that Chantre and Girard come up with together to describe the process, however, is, as mentioned, *innermost mediation*.⁴²² Girard does not present his idea of innermost mediation very systematically, but I will attempt here to draw the various pieces of his picture together.

First, positive mimesis involves *identification* over *imitation*. As discussed above, imitation is the creation of one's being through taking on the desires of one's model(s), which creates a *sameness* (i.e., *negative undifferentiation*) between the subject and model leading most often to escalating rivalry and violence.⁴²³ Identification, on the other hand, means the practice of empathy – the ability to stand in another's shoes, which due to its very nature necessitates that the empathetic person *is not* that same person as the one with whom they are empathizing.⁴²⁴ According to Ann W. Astell, a prolific writer and scholar on Girard who has written on this notion of empathy in particular, notes that empathy preserves a sense of “subjective distance.”⁴²⁵ Victoria Gaile Laidler, who writes in response to Astell, further describes empathy as that “sophisticated process discerns sameness and differentness, dances subject and object. Neither appropriating the other nor abdicating the self, empathy is imaginative companionship.”⁴²⁶ Empathy preserves boundaries between self and other, while transversing those same boundaries. Imitation, contrarily, breeds sameness and not differentiation.

⁴²¹ The semantic field Girard creates through the book around what he calls variously *positive mimesis*, *positive undifferentiation*, *charity*, *relationship*, *Christian love*, *imitation of Christ*, *identification*, et.al., is in itself interesting and details the various aspects of how Girard seems to understand how this process will take place.

⁴²² Ibid., 133.

⁴²³ Even a transcendent “external” mediator can be engaged in rivalry, such as in the biblical narratives of Eden and the Tower of Babel.

⁴²⁴ An in-depth analysis of Girard and the idea of empathy as an antidote to sacrificial violence can be found in Ann W. Astell, “Saintly Mimesis, Contagion, and Empathy in the Thought of Rene Girard, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil,” *SHOFAR* (Winter 2004), Vol. 22, No. 2, 116-131.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁴²⁶ Victoria Gaile Laidler, “Ann Astell on Empathy in the Work of Girard, Stein and Weil,” posted on November 29, 2013, accessed February 5, 2014. <http://gaudetetheology.wordpress.com/about/>.

Girard elaborates on the notion of identification as a kind of boundary-preservation. It is only when one's own boundary is intact that *charity*, (another synonym of Girard's for positive mimesis), becomes a possibility. Girard thus emphasizes the need to maintain the proper distance from the other. In *Battling*, Girard brings in a metaphor from Pascal to help explain the leap from "the order of bodies to that of charity."⁴²⁷ According to Girard, Pascal spoke of the distance one needs to be from a painting to see it properly; Pascal called this "the exact point which is the true place."⁴²⁸ It is from this true place, this appropriate distance, that one must practice empathetic identification (or charity.) Girard states that excessive empathy is mimetic, (presumably because one would be taking on the being of the model and thereby collapsing difference.) But excessive indifference is just as mimetic (excessive distance can create a repulsing reciprocity as well.) Girard asserts that identification with the other has to be envisaged as a means of correcting our mimetic tendencies. "Mimetism brings me too close or too far from the other. Identification makes it possible to see the other from the right distance."⁴²⁹ Girard recalls Hölderlin as an exemplar of identification, who greeted guests with a ceremoniousness that supported sustaining this positive boundary, keeping his guests at the proper distance, yet presumably sharing an intimate closeness.⁴³⁰

Ultimately, however, humans are still inherently mimetic creatures and, left to their own regressive mimetic tendencies, will be unable to follow these rules for relationship. For Girard, therefore, the *only* way for humans to access these proper relationships is through imitating Christ. "Only Christ makes it possible for humans to be at the right distance."⁴³¹ Because mimetic humans *need* a model, Girard emphasizes the need for to discern the right model: Christ alone "enables us to escape from human imitation."⁴³² Therefore, it seems that "positive mimesis" for Girard is precisely the imitation of Christ, which enables human-to-

⁴²⁷ Girard, *Battling*, 134.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

human relationships of identification instead of imitation; the imitation of Christ brings a wholeness to the human being that is self-sustaining, precluding the need to seek fulfillment through imitation placed elsewhere, (elsewhere meaning in a mimetic and sacrificial world.)

This same imitation of Christ is also called *innermost mediation*. Mimesis with Christ, therefore, is finding our desires mediated through that which lay deep within us—the innermost divine, if you will. With this idea of innermost mediation, Girard declares he is following Augustine’s lead in *Confessions*, when Augustine declares God is “more inward to me than my most inward part” or perhaps “more intimate to me than I am to myself” (Latin, *Deos interior intimo meo*).⁴³³ God here is described as the most inner recesses of the self; the pure being that lies beneath the sacrificial structure that has shaped human consciousness and activity. This innermost self, for Augustine, is indeed that which makes human experience possible in the first place, and accessing this innermost self is like a conversion experience; it wipes away the sickness of sin (i.e. the sickness of the violent experiences that have shaped humanity) in which one has previously been trapped.⁴³⁴ Thus, for Girard, I would assert that the various terms positive mimesis, imitation of Christ, and innermost mediation, all refer to the mediation of human desire through the example of the divine recesses of the self – the authentic self-- that which is spontaneous and free of the bondage of the sacrificial structure. In this sense, innermost mediation, or positive mimesis, will have nothing to do with “religion”; it has everything to do, however, with the living God.

There is a paradox in positive mimesis, however, that defies the very notion of imitation. Girard asserts that to imitate Christ is to no longer imitate and “to do everything to avoid being imitated.”⁴³⁵ Mediating through the innermost divine truly means free and creative response to the experience of life. Under the auspices of positive mimesis, religious behavior will not conform to the

⁴³³ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Amazon Digital Services, Inc.), 20.

⁴³⁴ Thank you to Ann W. Astell who suggested the idea of conversion to describe this process. Astell, author’s dissertation defense, 2013.

⁴³⁵ Girard, *Battling*, 122.

sacrificial institution as it has been known to humankind; and even “secular” behavior will go against the grain as human structures and systems have been set up as equally sacrificial. The imitation of Christ is rather imitating a freedom; and freedom by its very nature cannot be imitated. The wholeness of the self, and the boundary of the individual, will therefore be fully intact and in *positive undifferentiation* with all others who likewise mediate through the innermost self. In this way, Girard views humans as brothers “in” Christ—that is, each person united in their spontaneous freedom—a freedom that cannot be imitated, and thus neither will it impose itself as a model. Positive mimesis is almost an anti-structure structure; it is non-routinizable; it is, perhaps, love. And for Girard, while this kind of *being* is unable to be imitated, it at the same time generates positive contagion due to its manifest self-expression and authenticity.⁴³⁶

The fact that Girard includes this exposition of innermost mediation in his final book is heartening. It ultimately allows for the redemption of the human race, and avoids the scapegoating of human nature itself as the irredeemable cause of mimetic violence. But no one said escaping negative mimesis was going to be easy. Adapting to a mode of innermost mediation, as Girard has affirmed, seems a rare event. Part of the difficulty is in its defiance of a definition or a set actionable routine. As with “religion” in general, which has been distorted and reified over time, Girard’s notion of innermost mediation seems to have already incited some misinterpretation. One example of misinterpretation is in Wolfgang Palaver’s recent book *Rene Girard and Mimetic Theory*.⁴³⁷ Certainly Palaver is a seasoned “Girardian” and astute scholar, and his book is a well-received addition to the Girardian collection. I must, however, bring Palaver’s analysis to bear here. And his analysis, admittedly, is based on words written by Girard himself, who may not always have been so consistent in his efforts to explain positive

⁴³⁶ This is where I may disagree with Astell on her view of innermost mediation as a possible denotation of conscience. Whether conscience, as a concept, is an *a priori* connection to a moral code, or whether it is constructed in experience is not something that can be dealt with in this work. But Astell’s idea is worth considering and pursuing further given that there must be *something* that interjects consciously and intelligently in this kind of mimesis.

⁴³⁷ Wolfgang Palaver, *Rene Girard and Mimetic Theory* (Michigan State Press, 2013).

mimesis. I would like to demonstrate, then, how easy it is to regress into a reified and not-so-positive mimesis.

Palaver brings in ideas about positive mimesis from both *Deceit* and Girard's later writings. He is adept in his initial definitions and descriptions, discussing the aforementioned notions of "creative renunciation" as well as the imitation of Christ. Palaver states that the key to overcoming mimetic rivalry is to "walk as Christ walked," which is a form of "non-violent imitation"; Jesus is the only example Girard finds of one who does not enter into conflict either with the one he imitates or those who imitate him.⁴³⁸ Palaver rightly explains breaking the cycle of mimetic rivalry as a radical departure away from, essentially, suicide by our need for self-aggrandizement. Renouncing this is to enter into life—a God-centered life—and this is the ultimate aim of human desire. But Palaver's use of the term non-violence may be problematic, and will serve to severely limit what positive mimesis may really look like on a practical level.

For example, Palaver, following Girard, seems to have a romanticized view of Jesus' "non-violence." Palaver draws on the example Girard uses of "turning the other cheek" from Matthew's gospel to illustrate one way to imitate Jesus and to overcome destructive mimetic rivalry. Palaver quotes Girard:

*If you want to put an end to mimetic rivalry, you must surrender everything to your rival. (Italics in the original) This will suffocate rivalry at its core. This is not a matter of political strategy; it is much easier and more fundamental. If the other places outrageous demands on you—because he is already under the spell of mimetic rivalry—he expects that you play along and attempt to out do him. The only way to take the wind out of his sails is to do the exact opposite: Instead of outbidding him, yield to him doubly as much...If he strikes you on the left cheek, turn to him your right cheek.*⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 230.

⁴³⁹ René Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront...Entretiens avec Michel Treguer*. (Paris: Arléa, 1994) quoted in Palaver, 228.

“Turning the other cheek” may indeed look like this. I will always remember a workplace story told to me by a friend who had a colleague “steal” a meeting with a prestigious company that he had set up. Instead of getting angry, my friend put together all of the pertinent research and analytical models he had built about the said company, and gave them to his colleague. Instead of trying to get revenge, my friend gave his colleague *more* of his hard work. This effectively mitigated any ongoing conflict that might have arisen. “Turning the other cheek” can, in some cases, look like generosity.

Walter Wink in *The Powers That Be*,⁴⁴⁰ however, points to the danger of misinterpreting the notion of turning the other cheek in its usual fashion, and as Girard and Palaver interpret it above—an interpretation that can make one, under certain conditions, into a shamed doormat. Understanding the context in which Jesus spoke this injunction to turn the other cheek is key to understanding how one might develop a notion of positive mimesis. Wink distinguishes, first, the biblical reader’s assumption that the blow to the “right cheek” is a blow with the right fist. But a blow to the cheek would actually need to be done with the left fist. This is problematic as the left hand could only be used in ancient Israel for unclean tasks (a task performed with the left hand would require ritual ablution for ten days—no small matter.) Thus, the only feasible blow Jesus can be talking about is a backhand.

As Wink continues, backhand blows were blows to humiliate and degrade. Romans, for example, backhanded Jews, and Masters slaves. As one in Jesus’ audience, it is likely that one was used to being degraded. The injunction here, though, is not that the degraded give twice as much and then open up to receive another blow (as Girard’s interpretation would have it). Rather, the injunction is to turn the other cheek so that a right backhanded blow would be impossible. “By turning the cheek, the ‘inferior’ is saying: ‘I’m a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer.’”⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be* (NY: Doubleday, 1998).

⁴⁴¹ Wink, 102.

Jesus' injunction to turn the other cheek is therefore Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat on the bus. It is very different from if Parks had just given up her seat and walked home. Any other action would have likely achieved relatively little for black civil rights; and the kind of action that was needed reflected the inequalities of the parties involved in the exchange. This stands well against not just the quote by Girard above, but by Girard's basic premise reiterated by James G. Williams in *Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion, 1990-2010*: "The true opposition between what is Christian and what is archaic religiosity must be defined as an opposition between the sacrifice of oneself and the sacrifice of the other."⁴⁴² "Turning the other cheek" in the case of Jesus and Parks, however, is *not* an act of sacrificing oneself; it is a bold assertion of one's fundamental right to *being*.⁴⁴³ In many situations such as those in which systemic oppression is occurring, what positive mimesis may indeed look like is active resistance to degradation—degradation, which is denial and rejection of one's equal human (and divine) essence. In the examples of Jesus and Parks, a new possibility was opened up for the lives and the essential *right to be* for sinners and African-Americans respectfully. Non-violence need not mean passivity or self-sacrifice; dare I offer that it need not mean anything sacrificial; it is rather a "noncooperation with everything humiliating."⁴⁴⁴ It may even mean action born of authentic self-expression and inner freedom. Even if the circumstances are restrictive, a powerful expression of being is brought forth.

The question of what innermost mediation and the imitation of Christ looks like, therefore, would seem to depend very intensely on context. Reducing the notion of innermost mediation or positive mimesis to the concept of self-sacrificing non-violence, as Palaver (and Girard—at least in some writings) has

⁴⁴² James G. Williams, ed., *Girardians: The Colloquium on Violence and Religion, 1990-2010*, quoted from Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, note 1.

⁴⁴³ I would assert that Jesus' act on the cross must be taken out of the sacrificial context altogether. Jesus' crucifixion, just maybe, was the result of his assertion of his right, and others' rights *to be*. It would not even seem proper or necessary to speculate about what it is they were to be (e.g. atoned for, forgiven, etc.) It is more an effort to grant a dignity and a freedom to those who were not in the inner circles of society. It was also a truing up of integrity for those who were in the elite.

⁴⁴⁴ Wink quoting Gandhi, in Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 102.

done, seems more an attempt to simply reverse the trend of violence than to actually inquire deeply into what a lasting alternative would look like. If there is going to be a peaceful and non-violent human existence, this will need to spring from the deep well of humanity's authentic self. And the free self-expression which positive mimesis requires cannot be contained within Palaver's interpretation.

We must turn now back to positive mimesis and the problem of prescription. Perhaps the best one can say about positive mimesis is, again, that it is spontaneous and free, and it is not ego-driven—it will not come from the space of a fragmented self in search of wholeness. Fragmentation only leads to rivalry and the parasitic latching onto “models” to fill one's own emptiness. Positive mimesis, on the other hand, can only come from a space of wholeness and presence of being, which almost transcends the possibilities of mimesis altogether, and even our known humanity (for if one is truly free, one would no longer be *interdividual*). Ritualizing positive mimesis therefore seems an oxymoron; if positive mimesis is characterized as creative propriety and freedom, it cannot by definition be organized. But in working with the conditions of the world as they seem to be, and assuming that mediation is unavoidable, it seems best, at least, to find rituals and formulas that align with this kind of positive will, in the hope of achieving more skill through the forms. And yet there is still an issue: if positive mimesis varies by context, and can be defined only in the abstract, there is no formula at our disposal to latch onto. This can be frightening as it puts the responsibility for cultivating skill squarely on each and every individual person's lap.

More models are necessary, then, to teach what this kind of freedom and spontaneity looks like, and how one might reorient one's perspective. These models can come from the wide range of figures in human history, and Girard does admit that a few rare individuals have accessed it; it would serve well to bring these models into a future Girardian study. Here and now, however, it is at least possible to offer some Hebrew examples of positive mimesis to supplement Girard's example of Jesus.

First, I bring forth Jacob and the Birkhat ha-Banim as a model for positive mimesis. It was not in the purview of this dissertation to discuss the comedic aspects of our texts (all three of which contain strong elements of irony and comedy), but it is important to remark here how Jacob performs the blessing of his grandchildren in a comical, free and playful manner. If we recall, Joseph tried to line his children up to receive the “right” blessings. Jacob, nonetheless, humorously (as least for the reader if not for Joseph) reversed his arms and blessed Ephraim and Manasseh just as he wanted. Jacob knew exactly what he was doing and as such provided us with a groundbreaking new perspective: blessings are merely a distraction from the deeper need for affirmation. All children are entitled to acknowledgement of purpose, protection and a future. Jacob’s blessing was a spontaneous gesture of abundance and love. That there was no conflict has been discussed in detailed fashion in terms of Ephraim and Manasseh’s response to their “unequal” blessings; but that there was no conflict also says a lot about how Jacob blessed. Jacob’s blessing was the impromptu generation of positive mimesis.

The second example of positive mimesis brought forth from this study is the immediate, anti-sacrificial, even anti-ritual, and also comical contagion of the Ninevites. In this second comical episode, (in which even the animals are dressed for mourning), we again detect the kind of spontaneity and freedom we saw in Jacob. The Ninevites do not strategize for forgiveness; they do not negotiate their fate. They do not look for substitutes to take the blame. They just surrender. It *seems* so simple. The extreme demonstration of their surrender, however, is blatantly anti-sacrificial and it may also look absurd. They are atypical in their response, just as Jacob’s crossing his arms is free of Joseph’s limited perspective.

These two examples, in their expressions of freedom, community, spontaneity, affirmation, and even silliness, illustrate that perhaps the search for positive mimesis has the potential to be disassociated from the very dramatic intensity often linked to salvation. There is no sacrifice in the Birkhat ha-Banim. There is no sacrifice in Nineveh. I offer that these rituals might even call into

question Girard's foundational idea that religion is grounded in violence. Despite the history of sibling conflict that comes previous to the narrative of the Birkhat ha-Banim, or the sinful past of Nineveh, I find no violence in these examples. Of course we may encounter the problem of reification of our examples of positive mimesis into ritual form, rendering the creative energy of the initial events void. But I offer that, in Judaism, the emphasis must stay off of the ritual itself, and stay instead on the living act of reading the Torah. If Girard's positive mimesis stems from brothers "in" Christ, the Jewish version is of a community "through" Torah. Torah, as I hope I have shown, provides traditional vaccines to immunize against violence; it includes practical prescriptions to help alleviate mimetic crises; and it moreover mediates the reader's desire to align with the freedom and mystery of the divine.

With this in mind, I propose that the new nation of Israel that emerges in the book of Exodus is founded not upon the blood, but upon the *peace* of Ephraim and Manasseh—a peace that is generated from the freedom and creativity of Jacob, who inspires a new way to authentically, and generously, bless. Perhaps can find hope in what Girard has called innermost mediation, and the human possibility of creating a peaceful and positive mimetic contagion. Given the humor of our examples, it is even possible that the way of positive mimesis might be fun.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion:

Vaccinations from the Torah: Building Immunity to Habitual Violence and Founding a New Order of Peace

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

--Albert Einstein

We have an atonement equivalent to it, and that is acts of loving-kindness.

--R. Yohanan ben Zakkai

Julian Assange, the infamous founder of WikiLeaks, once said, "You have to start with the truth. The truth is the only way that we can get anywhere. Because any decision-making that is based upon lies or ignorance can't lead to a good conclusion." This statement has many levels of relevance for the current project. On one level, it must be admitted that it is true the sacrificial has an uncanny draw for humanity. Humanity lives under a veil of ignorance, pulled as if by gravity to the violent mechanisms of blame, mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, with barely a hint of awareness (if any) of one's participation in perpetuating the cycle. Humanity lives under an umbrella of delusion and wonders why the world is just so. In addition, it seems from our examples that even if one sees through the veil, backsliding into violence is almost inevitable. We have seen this regression into the romantic lie continuously: the Tanakh itself provides

characters that illustrate this habitual relapse; many of our rabbinic commentators, revelation at their fingertips, have failed to break free; and some of our modern scholars have also demonstrated their sacrificial hermeneutics.⁴⁴⁵ The sacrificial may oddly feel comforting for its familiarity; it may even occur that “good” violence is easier, quicker and preferable to the alternative. But as our sailors of Jonah illustrate: the satanic cycle of sacrifice is paved with good intentions. Violence breeds more violence, and giving in to the cycle casts out the divine. The truth here is that we are truly suckers for the sacrificial. While we have received both Judaic and Christian revelations of its operations (and the revelations of other religions and sources of wisdom), our structures of thought have been deeply enculturated in blame.

On another level, the truth is that humanity has been given antidotes to sacrificial violence. While the Christian revelation has been lauded as the clearest of these revelations, I hope I have demonstrated in this dissertation that the revelations of the Tanakh are equally lucid, efficacious and moreover practical. The Tanakh has spoken from the voice of the victim; it has also provided a witness to how persecution operates, specific directives for what can be done about it (sometimes one must take one’s enemy seriously),⁴⁴⁶ and a frank message about the responsibility each person will have to bear for transformation. Another truth is: we will not be able to get to a good conclusion or happy ending unless we *hear* the texts and alter how we think and behave. How we hear the texts is decisive, and we must remain aware of the *contexts* we

⁴⁴⁵ For a more detailed look at Judaism’s historical regression into the sacrificial, see Pesach Schindler, “Esau and Jacob revisited: demon versus tzadik?” *The Free Library* (July, 1), accessed September 1, 2013, [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Esauand Jacob revisited: demon versus tzadik?-a0229543443](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Esauand+Jacob+revisited:+demon+versus+tzadik?-a0229543443). Also, for an examination of Christian historical regression into the sacrificial, see Peter Stork, “On Post-Biblical Regression into the Sacrificial,” accessed September 6, 2013, http://www.livingpeacesite.org/An_Introduction_to_the_Work_of_Rene_Girard.pdf; Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2001), 96-139.

⁴⁴⁶ See the Appendix for a discussion of the practical prescriptions.

bring to them. Hearing the text entails distinguishing when the text itself reverts into the sacrificial, and noticing that we have likely done the same.⁴⁴⁷

The three vaccines examined in this dissertation are therefore crucial to waking up out of the satanic romance (at least for Jews, but many of the prescriptions, e.g. fasting, communal effort, are widely applicable.) Humanity will need to garner the confidence to hear the truth of violence and do the hard work entailed to pull out of the vicious cycle.

That humanity is absolutely capable of pulling out of this vicious cycle on its own seems clear from the Tanakh. There are a plethora of examples for reconciliation moving from gradual transformation (e.g. Jonah; also Jacob and Esau) to instant transformation (e.g. the Ninevites) to already transformed (e.g. Ephraim and Manasseh.) Jewish boys are vaccinated weekly as Ephraim and Manasseh to experience the wholeness and presence of truly *being* blessed in peace and dignity. At the same time, the one enacting the blessing is called, according to our interpretation, to embody the creativity and freedom of Jacob. One has a heightened connection to the divine on the Sabbath; the Sabbath *shekinah* is humanity's access to *being* in the image of God. The commandment to follow the Sabbath is also a deterrent for negative mimesis: it is a commanded rest from the creative work of the yetzer ha-ra. The Sabbath is a day of peace.

But the “peace vaccine” of the Birkhat ha-Banim is not an instant cure, and humanity must still figure out how to embody all that Jacob and the sibling pair represent during the rest of the week. Rabbinic and other commentators, regressing into the sacrificial, ascribe a necessary death to effectuate humanity's transformation through the figure of Ephraim, the Messiah ben Joseph, whose death is the vanquishing of the yetzer ha-ra. Rather than scapegoating this part

⁴⁴⁷ It is my view that both the Tanakh and the New Testament provide examples for this kind of regression. We have provided in this dissertation some examples of the Tanakh reversion, particularly in the sailors of Jonah, as well as in Jonah himself. Regarding the New Testament, Jesus' words from the cross (originally from Psalm 22.1), “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” seems a parallel to Jonah's words from the whale that blame God for that which only Jonah was responsible. There are many possible explanation of this, but the point seems worthy of consideration.

of the self, however, the Tanakh seems clear in its more subtle, simple, and affirming Sabbath prescription. In Jacob's imitation of divine freedom and creativity, all siblings become the blessed. Jacob's positive mimesis is contagious; each child he blesses is then able to be whole, free, and full of unique purpose. Every week children are affirmed in this way on the Sabbath, even if the world at large remains enmeshed in rivalry.

The truth of the Book of Esther shocks the reader into this realization about the immutable violence of the world. The Book of Esther reveals in not so subtle fashion that the mechanism requiring "good" violence is continually operative despite the redemption of the victim; and the primary ritual of Purim to hear the reading of the Megillah is the command to *hear* our utter entrapment. Purim commands that we emerge out of the mimetic crisis, too, but through reading, not bloodshed. As with the Birkhat ha-Banim, a history of interpretation of Purim has caused exegesis and rituals to arise that have misinterpreted the text inside sacrificial hermeneutics. But the book is a mirror for sudden awakening; its violence and unsavoriness is a shock tactic to wake us up. The Purim vaccine is a yearly mega-dose of violence. As we listen we are assaulted with its violence. And while Jews celebrate their escape from imminent death, the means by which this escape is accomplished may rightly make one ill. The stark reality of the immutable Persian law is the spiritual hopeful's exile in a violent world. And so we come back to this truth: violence is real and rampant, and may indeed come after us. Whether one is a victim or a persecutor, one is trapped in its hold. As long as binary, sacrificial thinking gives humanity its blueprint for being and acting in the world, persecutors and victims will always arise. In addition, when the operating power is itself sacrificial, one may have to use the force of violence against itself and alter its course, just to stay alive. Purim, if we do not see its revelatory aspect, is merely a celebration of sacrificial religion, and not a celebration of God.

The Book of Jonah and the holy day of Yom Kippur is the flipside of Esther, and is a stark and direct challenge to enter face-to-face with one's own

conditioning, attachment to, and complacency in habitual violence. The book says humans are capable of transforming on a dime, but also explores the reality of humanity's stubborn resistance and regression that sustains our "comfortable" status quo. One reads the book of Jonah when hungry from fasting, the question arising: will one *return* to one's old way of being, slaves to our base desires? Or will one return to an existence that is inclusive, generous, merciful, and in deep communication and reciprocity with the other? The book is the shofar's wake-up call; life or death is for our choosing. This third vaccine against mimetic desire injects the Jew on Yom Kippur with the physical and spiritual discomfort of Jonah's sacrificial imprisonment, and it offers the possibility of release.

While the behavior of Jonah may vaccinate the reader against mimetic tendencies, the Ninevites' repentance presents a second peace vaccine. Like Jacob, the Ninevites' response to Jonah's prophecy contains no resistance; it is a free outpouring of surrender, an embracing of life, and an absolute renunciation of violence. Dressing their animals in sackcloth is the Ninevites' declaration of their anti-sacrificial stand. They are the model presented to the Jewish community in the midst of crisis, in the hope that this same life-giving freedom might be emulated.

Some of our vaccines, then, contain a little bit of the poison in them—this is how they build up our immunity. Certainly being exposed to Jonah's sacrificial mentality, and the ritualized scapegoating of Esther, may deter the readers of these texts from their violence. Sometimes people get sick after a vaccine, though, because even a tiny dose of the virus is powerful. In this vein, the vaccine of Jonah has also been interpreted through sacrificial hermeneutics that justify Jonah's inclination for self-preservation (and the preservation of Israel), even if it must be done through retributive or scapegoating violence. As I will discuss in more detail below (in the Afterword), these types of exegeses are interpretive techniques to make suffering in history meaningful for Jews, and to find ways to ensure survival. The importance of hearing the voice of those who

have been persecuted due to scapegoating violence is integral to humanity's healing. These particularist trends in exegesis have also been used to illustrate the unique self-perceived status of certain Jewish groups in history (e.g. the Qumran community, or sometimes Jews in general under the designation "chosen.") Jewish groups have often fallen into a hermeneutic focused on their existence as an intentional community of a new order—a community of holiness—that may not need to be infinitely "of the world", even if it is still lived "in the world." Scapegoating the world, however, is still under the influence of the sacrificial disease and denies one's interdependence with the whole of creation. All the world's children are already blessed—all of them. As James G. Williams brilliantly notes, Jacob returns his blessing to Esau at their reunion in Genesis 33 because he realizes he no longer needs it. He has become whole in wrestling with God. The blessing was merely an object of distraction from the real problem of Jacob's perceived insufficiency.

One cannot sacrifice even the yetzer ha-ra, then, as it is what fundamentally makes us human (as Girard also declares of mimetic desire). Martha Reineke, drawing on Rebecca Adams' work, has noted the inherent problematic in Girard's theory which leaves many of his followers desperately craving a "Girardian" solution to violent mimesis:

As Adams perspicaciously notes in her essay on loving mimesis (2000), Girard's mimetic framework seems split between an anthropology that documents "bad desire" in humans and a theology that establishes "good desire" in God. However, Girard's bifurcation of the processes of mimetic desire into two distinct arenas—human life and God's life—risks scapegoating everything human: one imitates Christ and shares in nonviolent love only by (still quoting Adams) "renouncing or expelling a fundamentally violent human nature/culture."⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁸ Martha Reineke, "Toward a Creative and Loving Mimesis: Insights in Winnicott for Girard," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, Issue 14, 2007, 79-95, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ctn/summary/v014/14.1reineke.html>.

I aver, agreeing with Reineke (and Adams), that Girard, *on one hand*, leads us to believe that there is no way out of our mimetic violence short of the death of this troublesome part of human nature. Girard consistently states that humankind, though in possession of the knowledge of mimesis and scapegoating, will resist transforming itself—even questioning whether humanity has the ability to transform itself. But Girard has also acknowledged that there is the possibility of transformation through what he has called variously *creative renunciation*, *positive mimesis*, *innermost mimesis*, *et. al.* As discussed in the previous chapter, there is thus a way out of the sacrificial cycle in Girard’s work itself, and the possibility exists *in human nature itself*. At worst, a *part* of human nature may need to be sacrificed, that is, the yetzer ha-ra. But as the Jew is shielded from the workings of the yetzer ha-ra on the Sabbath, and is given something of a divine “boost”, Girard also acknowledges, it seems, that there is something accessible within human nature that can transform mimesis into a positive.

As a less dramatic alternative to scapegoating human nature, then, and as I have outlined in the previous chapter, one can learn to exert control over the yetzer ha-ra in the world through the prescriptions and vaccines that have been given, while also redesigning oneself according to the examples of anti-sacrificial structures for thinking and being. The journey out of violence will involve the whole human—how one thinks, how one acts, and who one *is*. The ritual complements to our texts reinforce the intended transformation into our new existence, and the emphasis on reading, studying and hearing Torah cannot be overemphasized in this effort. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else in any other way.”⁴⁴⁹ The rabbinic injunction to “Get thee to the schoolhouse!” is thus a Jewish mantra. The Jew sees the face of God inscribed in the words of Torah—the text itself is the encounter. The text is thus both a reading of us, and a

⁴⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 66.

reading of the divine; access to sacred liminality is in engagement (and sometimes wrestling) with the text.

How one reads and hears the text therefore determines one's openness to God and one's relationship to the divine. In this light, one can certainly read the Tanakh as a sacrificial text. This has been humankind's prevalent and automatic way of reading. But what I hope I have shown in this dissertation is that it is possible to have a "Girardian Judaism" – an approach to the texts and liturgy of Judaism that fully and effectively reveals the habitual mechanisms of violence that stand in the way of humanity's transformation, and that distort humanity's understanding of the sacred. I hope I have also shown that a Girardian Judaism distinguishes a real and practical "medical" regime for controlling violence and aggressive tendencies. Third, I hope to have accomplished that a Girardian Jewish reading distinguishes the Jewish community as one living "in" Torah; the Torah commands Jews to strive and to live in the divine image of freedom, creativity, abundance, generosity and holiness. And Jews are to make this holiness contagious.

Perhaps only one question remains: if Girard has been shown to be a valuable lens for interpreting the Hebrew texts and ritual practices, how might Judaism add value to Girard? There are indeed some lingering areas of incongruity of the Hebrew revelation with Girard that should now be addressed. In moving toward the creation of a sincere "Hebraicized" version of Girard—i.e., a "Jewish Girardianism" as opposed to a "Girardian Judaism"—I will take a moment in the following chapter to present these lingering obstacles as food for further research and thought.

AFTERWORD

Towards a Hebraicizing of Girard's Theory

We cannot despair of humanity, since we ourselves are human beings.

--Albert Einstein

In the first chapter of this dissertation on the primary works of Rene Girard, one deficiency of Girard's work and correlative secondary sources was brought forth as an area that needed to be addressed. This primary deficiency could be articulated as follows: though Girard gives fair acknowledgement to the Hebrew scriptures, the final interpretive theology he endorses is a Christian one that sees the Hebrew revelation as fundamentally incomplete. While Girard's alignment of mimetic theory and scapegoating with his religious belief is helpful in its strength of position, this choice necessarily brackets out possibilities for his mimetic theory that do not align with his Christian point of view. Further, in Girard's providing the blessing to only one sibling, we have seen the disaster that results. Judaism and Christianity are as Ephraim and Manasseh, and both of them are whole and complete in their own way. But can Girard's theory be extracted from his Christian ideology? If so, what might a Jewish theology, or even anthropology, do with Girard's thought?

This dissertation was first and foremost, then, an effort to determine if Girard's notions of mimetic desire and scapegoating were ideas that Hebrew scriptures and ritual could be said to "reveal" and address. In order to achieve this, Hebrew

sacred texts and their rituals, supplemented by rabbinic interpretations of those texts and rituals, were brought into conversation with Girard's theories, to see what kind of compatibility, or perhaps incongruity, would result. In this process, I used Girard as my hermeneutic, assuming a basic soundness of his theory. I placed the lens of Girard's ideas over the Hebrew texts being examined. The more I researched, wrote, and discussed this project, however, the more the Hebrew texts and liturgy seemed to scream these Girardian ideas aloud all on their own. There was, indeed, a profound resonance, and I hope I have shown that these resonances are beyond denial. In the end, three Jewish texts and rituals were determined to be "vaccines" for mimetic desire, opening up a pathway to view the Hebrew text as a full exposition of Girard's theory, in contrast to Girard's claim of its incompleteness. A type of "Girardian Judaism" has been accomplished.

Now the task is to address how Judaism can express itself through Girard. What would a "Jewish Girardianism" look like? What obstacles and challenges emerge that would prevent Girard from being compatible with Judaism? What would prevent Jews from adopting Girard's theory? I may admit here that the major content of this dissertation was constructed to show how the Hebrew Scriptures revealed the human phenomenon of mimetic desire and scapegoating, and to show the usefulness of the Hebrew Scriptures for Girardian studies and vice versa; thus, little was presented to the contrary. I will move on now to elaborate on some of the deeper points of dispute in bringing Girard and Judaism together, and how they may be resolved. The usefulness of Girard and Judaism for each other is noteworthy, thus these deeper crash points are necessary to acknowledge if we are to ascend above any mimetic competition for truth.

The issues at stake in bringing Girard and Judaism together and creating what I call a "Hebraicizing" of Girard's theory are as follows. The first issue addresses the Girardian assertion of the absolute certainty of who the victim is, and that they are innocent. The second issue pertains to the gap Girard presents

between violent humanity and a completely non-violent God. (That is, how do we get “there” from “here”? And how can we be certain of God’s nature?) The third issue is whether one can reconcile particularistic interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures with the universal revelation of mimetic rivalry without diminishing the importance of the Jewish emphasis on experience, identity and history. I will address these issues one by one. In the end, I believe both the Jewish and the Girardian perspectives will be enriched for being put in dialogue with each other.

Issue #1: The Ambiguity of the Victim and Jewish Openings for Transformation

With great caution I include this question about the innocence of victims in the scapegoating process, and whether the innocence of the victim is absolutely necessary for the disclosure of mimetic violence. This question gets to the heart of a deep tension between Judaism and Christianity, which has influence upon how Jewish readers will hear Girard’s ideas.

The New Testament, of course, has a very strong claim regarding the innocence of Jesus—a claim that is central dogma for the Christian faith. This claim of innocence, in the context of the history of the church, is traditionally necessary for Christ to operate theologically for the expiation of the sins of humanity. For Girard, Christ’s innocence is not related to a need to expiate guilt, nor for propitiatory purposes, but to portray with absolute certainty that the scapegoating performed was, indeed, the murder of an *innocent* being and, moreover, of God Himself. Girard asserts: “A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence—by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of

Violence.”⁴⁵⁰ Girard is quite clear in confessing his Christian position, and in affirming the revelation of a non-violent and sinless God through Jesus.

In line with this theological position of the uniqueness of Jesus, Girard is able to support his open preference for the New Testament revelation. Jesus’ innocence is declared in the New Testament narratives, and this innocence supports Girard’s assertion that the New Testament is the superlative revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. Girard states:

Something happens that begins in the Old Testament. There are many stories that reverse this scapegoat process. In the story of Cain and Abel, the story of Joseph, the book of Job, and many of the psalms, the persecuting community is pictured as guilty and the victim is innocent. But Christ, the son of God, is the ultimate “scapegoat”—precisely because he is the son of God, and since he is innocent, he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims were innocent and the communities guilty.⁴⁵¹

Following Christ’s unique innocence, Girard notes the existential guilt of humankind: “If Christ alone is innocent, then Adam is not the only one to be guilty. All men share in this archetypal state of blame, but only to the extent that the chance of becoming free has been offered to them and they have let it slip away.”⁴⁵² Girard’s anthropology is undeniable in its assertion of a tainted human nature—humankind is guilty of original sin as an existential state. This original sin, for Girard, becomes *actual* “when knowledge about violence is placed at humanity’s disposition.”⁴⁵³ In other words, it seems one’s sin is original in the sense of potential; and once one has received the revelation of Christ, one’s sin

⁴⁵⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 219.

⁴⁵¹ Rene Girard, interview by Brian McDonald, *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, 2013, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-10-040-i#ixzz2dYzy9Z5L>.

⁴⁵² Girard, *Things Hidden*, 223.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

becomes materialized if one does not ingest the revelation and follow the correct path.

There are several issues with Girard's professions for the Hebraicizing of his theory, which is admittedly articulated from the position of a faith other than Judaism. Girard, as a Christian, is advocating Jesus' innocence as an existential condition, which is of course appropriate within his belief system (and indeed necessary.) Layers of Catholic dogma were generated in order to ensure that Jesus' condition as sinless could not be put into doubt. Girard expands on this dogma with his own interest:

Saying that Christ is God, born of God, and saying that he has been conceived without sin is stating over and over again that he is completely alien to the world of violence within which humankind has been imprisoned every since the foundation of the world: that is to say, ever since Adam.⁴⁵⁴

This faith position is clear and informs Girard's evaluation of texts; his faith in an utterly non-violent God impels Girard to discredit texts that seem to impute any degree of violence to the deity. As Christ was also man, there is the additional challenge to Judaism to meet Christianity with a similarly "innocent" victim. Judaism's anthropology does not allow for this, though,⁴⁵⁵ and while Girard *does* acknowledge the reversal of the scapegoat mechanism in the Hebrew texts, the inability of the Hebrew Bible characters to be "innocent" in the same existential fashion as Jesus, is purported by Girard to diminish the Hebrew narrative's revelatory effectiveness.

The innocence of the victim in the way that the Christian understands Jesus' innocence will always be an obstacle for Judaism. This is not necessarily

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ There are many different positions regarding the human condition in Judaism, but generally there is agreement that humans are prone to sin. Try as they might, humans are prone to "miss the mark."

an obstacle for “Girardianism,” though, as the *absolute* innocence of the victim is *not* after all *required* to reveal the structure of violence. Girard himself asserts: “It matters little, in effect, who the victim is, provided that there is one.”⁴⁵⁶ Therefore the Hebrew Bible narratives, for Girard, do sustain their worth as revelations for the victimage mechanism. But the Hebraic revelation is different in its anthropological ambiguity. This has a bearing on how Girard’s theory needs to be nuanced if it is to be applicable to Judaism without prejudice.

What would be helpful to make Girard applicable (and palatable) within Jewish thought is to recognize the phenomenon of scapegoating in a solely structural light-- a light that is distinct from Girard’s own professions of faith. Scapegoating must not be understood through the idea of Jesus as free of sin, but structurally-- as placing *undue* blame upon a victim that is in complete disproportion to what, in the end, the victim may or may not have done. This can be corroborated in Girard’s own words:

The biblical and Christian power of understanding phenomena of victimization comes to light in the modern meaning of certain expressions such as “scapegoat.” A “scapegoat” is initially the victim in the Israelite ritual that was celebrated during a great ceremony of atonement (Lev. 16.21)...The ritual consisted of driving into the wilderness a goat on which all the sins of Israel had been laid. The high priest placed his hands on the head of the goat, and this act was supposed to transfer onto the animal everything likely to poison relations between members of the community. The effectiveness of the ritual was the idea that the sins were expelled with the goat and then the community was rid of them...This ritual of expulsion is similar to that of the *pharmakos* in Greece, but it is much less sinister because the victim is never a human being. When an animal is chosen, the injustice seems less, or even nonexistent. This is no doubt why the scapegoat ritual doesn’t move us to the same repugnance as the “miraculous” stoning instigated by Apollonius of Tyana. But the principle of

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 142. And I would like to state the nuance here added by Ann W. Astell: “But the victim is always *relatively* innocent for Girard, in the sense that s/he is singled out to bear the responsibility for the *community’s* division.” Astell, author’s dissertation defense (December 20, 2013).

transference is no less exactly the same. In a distant period when the ritual was effective as ritual, the transfer of the community's transgressions onto the goat must have been facilitated by the bad reputation of this animal, by its nauseating odor and its aggressive sexual drive.⁴⁵⁷

Scapegoating, even for Girard, does not therefore require the innocence of the victim as a condition, but reveals a mechanism of unjustified blame (i.e., the animal was not “guilty”) as a way to mitigate violence. This structure is also an aetiology for the origin and continuation of mitigating violence. Certainly the history of the Jewish people as well as the Hebrew Scriptures can fit readily into this framework, and early sacrificial practices were even based on it.⁴⁵⁸

When viewed in this light, the power of the mechanism as revealed in the Tanakh is enabled full expression and full revelatory power. This expression enables the Book of Esther, as we have discussed, to list a *series* of persecution texts, and a series of victims and persecutors. It allows expulsions and murders in Genesis to be viewed through this idea of victimage. It allows other texts, too, in particular the Exodus from Egypt, to elucidate how (and even why (i.e., they were too fertile, mirroring the “aggressive sexual drive” of the goat)) Jews were entrenched in a mimetic conflict and ultimately expelled. Further, as Girard asserts, these texts speak from the perspective of the victim. Whether the victims were “innocent” or not, they were human, and they were unjustly accused and violated.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ Girard, *I See Satan*, 155.

⁴⁵⁸ In the Temple periods of Judaism, religious ritual made explicit notes about the innocence of the *sacrificial* victim, e.g. they must be “without blemish,” referring to animal substitutions to atone for human sin. After the destruction of the Second Temple, these sacrifices were no longer practiced, though even before the destruction there was a movement towards the spiritualization of sacrifice—substituting the reading of the Torah for the sacrificial rituals. See Fisbane, “Aspects of the Transformation of Sacrifice in Judaism.”

⁴⁵⁹ From the perspective of a Jew, Jesus would have been of the same disposition and living within the same human condition as the scapegoats, Jewish or otherwise, just described. Any Jew who subscribes to the basic Jewish belief system, would not hold that Jesus was existentially any different. Without the theological underpinning of Jesus as the Son of God, and Jesus’ existential (even pre-existential) innocence, the scapegoating of Jesus would have no more or less merit as a revelation than the scapegoating incidents of the Hebrew Bible. Richard

This structural definition would, in addition, lend the Jewish community an appropriate lens through which to examine the atrocities of history. Scholar David Biale has written a wonderful work in this vein named *Blood and Belief*, which addresses how Jews were, (in my words), ritually prepared for their scapegoating throughout different eras in history.⁴⁶⁰ Biale brings to light the ironic conception that the Jews, as a minority and underrepresented group in almost every country in the world, get endowed with an inexplicable and intense kind of power. This power was seen in many cases as an almost vampiric aggression. Like the goat with the aggressive sexual drive or nasty odor, the Jews are, in this way, set up to receive blame and its ensuing violence. This creation of the Jews as a potent and threatening “Other” is what creates the Jews over and over as a scapegoated community—setting them up for *undue blame* to be cast.

In this light, scapegoating has nothing to do with communal or individual innocence.⁴⁶¹ If Girard’s theory is to be palatable to Jews and with the Hebrew Scriptures, it ultimately must stick to a theology-free structure. In terms of Jewish anthropology, ambiguities abound: Jonah the prophet is obstinate; Mordecai is defiant; Esther is (perhaps) manipulative. The character of Job is one of the few in the Tanakh who is described as *tamim* -- giving the sense of being whole, perfect or complete -- perhaps implying one free of sin. Even in Job, however,

Landes of Boston University, for example, “takes issue with Girard’s claim that Jesus was innocent. He writes that Girard uses the term Christ—not Jesus—and is working with the myth of the Christ rather than the real person of Jesus, who was not innocent at all in the eyes of those in power at the time.” Landes continues that “the Romans viewed him as a dangerous division maker, a disturber of the pax romana, whose peace the Romans nailed down, literally, with crucifixion.” Quoted in Teresa Ann Pitts, “Politics as Violence: A Girardian Analysis of Pre-Genocide Rwandan Politics,” Master’s thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Blacksburg, VA: 2011), accessed September 6, 2013, http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-05102011153938/unrestricted/PITTS_TA_T_2011.pdf.

⁴⁶⁰ David Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007).

⁴⁶¹ While James G. Williams provides an excellent analysis of the narratives of the Tanakh, he, like Girard and many other Girardians, ultimately advocates for the superiority of Jesus as the innocent victim. See Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*. Also, Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000); and Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997).

the reader finds that there was something more he needed to learn by the end of the book-- for he repents in dust and ashes.

Judaism presents an anthropology in which humankind, as divine creation, is indeed "good." Yet there is the yetzer ha-ra implanted in humans that makes them prone to sin. As individuals and as a community, therefore, a victim need not be (and cannot be) divinized to demonstrate an unjust act of violence. The victims are not innocent inasmuch as they are human. The scapegoats rather than being divinized to create a false "pagan" sacred, are instead *humanized*. Thus, for Jews, the revelation of the mechanism is only clear when the violence that has been committed comes face-to-face with the flesh and blood humans who have been the recipients of that violence. Emanuel Levinas would indicate that it is a genuine face-to-face encounter alone that can elicit an ethic of responsibility for the other, and a cessation of violence. Thus when Abel's blood cries out from the land, it no longer matters what Abel *might* have done to instigate his brother. We then come face-to-face with Mordecai and all of his people who were to be exterminated. Who would in this context ask if Mordecai acted with disrespect? Nineveh, finally, is saved out of mercy, and not because its people were innocent. The highest holy day of Yom Kippur expects one, therefore, to come before God having reconciled with their fellow humans, and with one self, first. One stands before the Ark on this day in synagogue, face-to-face with God's word in the Torah that speaks about the phenomenon of violence, as well as mercy and loving-kindness. The Torah, for Jews, is the face of the God who cares for all who have been vulnerable in their humanity; vulnerability and striving in all covenants is sought, not necessarily innocence. And atonement is available and immediate. Human foibles and sufferings are granted forgiveness.

Sandor Goodhart has pointed out that using Girard as a structure for interpretation does not mean one needs to come from a standpoint of a particular belief system.

Part of the limitation of our own customary perspective on these matters may be our thinking that traditional scriptural texts are only (or even primarily) scripts for religious practice. It may be that in order to understand a thinker like Rene Girard we need to expand our conception of both "the religious" and of "religious scripture," and recognize the extent to which scriptural writing, like the writing we have identified for the past two hundred years in European culture as the "literary," participates in the deepest and most thorough-going questioning available to us. Does that mean that in order to participate in a Girardian perspective one needs of necessity at least to share his reverence for Jewish and Christian interpretative readings? Again, not necessarily. Girard has asserted that his reading is a "scientific hypothesis."⁴⁶²

A "scientific hypothesis" means that Girard's theory, according to Goodhart, may definitionally be a tentative explanation of an observation that can be applied and tested. If Girard's scapegoating mechanism can be managed within this type of discussion, it will go very far within the Jewish community.

Issue #2: The Ambiguity of the Sacred

One finds in Girard a second obstacle to Hebraicizing his theory, and this is with regard to Girard's conception of the divine. Girard's position on Jesus as the Son of God provides a view of Girard's understanding of the divine nature in general, which is one of non-violence and love. Girardian scholar Per Bjornar Grande, for example, remarks that, "The Kingdom of God meant a replacement of sacrifice and prohibitions *by love*."⁴⁶³ And more elaborately, author James Warren, in his book *Apocalypse or Compassion?* explains:

⁴⁶² Sandor Goodhart, "The Self and Other People: Reading Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation with Rene Girard and Emmanuel Levinas," in *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, Vol. 7, Issue 16 (Fall 2001), 14-25, *Philosophy Documentation Center*, accessed July 6, 2013, <http://www.pdcnet.org>.

⁴⁶³ Per Bjornar Grande, "Girard's Christology," accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.preachingpeace.org/documents/Girard_Christology.pdf.

But we must bear in mind that while Jesus effected a reconciliation of humanity to God, God had no need to be reconciled to us. The rivalry had been all on one side; from God's side there had always been unconditional love. Jesus' death and resurrection has given us access to that love, as a result of the opening of our hearts in response to his infinite forgiveness. In the place where our envy and anger should have been met with reciprocal violence, it encountered instead an absolutely unlimited font of compassionate forgiveness.⁴⁶⁴

As expressed in Girard and through the works of those like Grande and Warren who write in support of his theory, Jesus was certainly in the world, but not "of the world." Language here is tricky for, though Jesus was human, he could not, for Girard or his followers be "of" the world of violence. As the divine incarnate, Jesus is the bearer and conveyor of deep love toward humanity with no violence in him. The divine Father, for Girard, is also, naturally, this.

As a result of this theological position, the texts of the Tanakh that convey a "mixed message" (if you will) about what "love" might look like are considered at best incomplete revelations. Girard calls these ambiguous Hebrew texts 'mixed texts' or 'texts in travail.' For Girard, these terms mean that these texts are uncertain about the nonviolent nature of the deity, and they often ascribe violence to the divine. For Girard, any text that connects violence with the sacred, or expresses ambivalence about oppressive victimage, is considered ambiguous, and therefore an incomplete revelation.⁴⁶⁵ Quite understandably, Girard hesitates to give credence to implications of a "violent" sacred, and he is unsatisfied with any ambiguity along these lines. Even a remotely violent sacred would raise an issue for his theory, and also likely to his faith.

I bring to bear Walter Brueggemann's hermeneutic for textual exegesis here as an analogue, whose resonance with Girard has already been noted by

⁴⁶⁴ James Warren, *Compassion or Apocalypse?: A Comprehensible Guide to the Thought of Rene Girard* (PA: Christian Alternative Books, 2013).

⁴⁶⁵ Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), 92. On this topic of the ambiguity of the sacred, Kirwan discusses the resonance between Girard and Brueggemann, which I will pick up on below.

Michael Kirwan in his book *Girard and Theology*. Brueggemann's formula of biblical exegesis makes note of two different locations for the sacred: "in the fray" and "above the fray." The sacred in the fray is the sacred that is entangled in history; this sacred is revealed in the details of the texts, locating revelation within the parameters of space and time, using history as its vehicle. The sacred above the fray is less common in the biblical scriptures, but presents a more remote impersonal force in operation—the mover behind what is seen, if you will—and that which is more a universal principle. Brueggemann locates the highest source of revelation not in the fray or above it, but rather *in the tension between the two*. One might say Brueggemann locates revelation in the space in between "here" and "there." He locates revelation in the *relationship* between the nitty-gritty of human life, and the ideal of peace, the Messianic Era, *Gan Eden*, the Kingdom of God, Heaven, and the like. Therefore, the sacred presence is here and now, but also striving.

Often accused of advocating an "ambiguous" sacred, Brueggemann seems to me to exegete in the Jewish spirit that makes integrating Judaism with Girard problematic. Unlike Brueggemann who is able to find the source of revelation *in* the ambiguity, Girard believes this ambiguity to be merely a step in the evolutionary process toward the more poignant and certain revelation of the New Testament. In other words, Girard views the sacred as well 'above the fray', 'other-worldly', and with 'no violence in him.' The desire that Jesus expresses for God and only God, and the being he presents to the world as such, is what humans, too, are to manifest mimetically. As I understand it in this paradigm, humans are never to *become* God, though they are to be *like* God in imitation of Jesus' God-centered desire.

And yet, the many faces of the Hebrew sacred in the Tanakh may make this aspiration tricky. The Hebrew sacred is partly in complete alignment with Girard's divine-- God is love, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. *Hesed*, or loving-kindness is a divine virtue that to be emulated. But the Hebrew sacred expresses hesed in unexpected ways. This is the sacred that wrestles Jacob,

who tempts Job, and who brings Abraham to his emotional limit. The Hebrew God brings one into deep confrontation with one's self, one's identity, and one's limited understanding. This kind of ruthless compassion may indeed be called "love" when in the abstract, but on the human court it may not look entirely "non-violent." Perhaps, the Hebrew God may in fact be likened to the person of Jesus. The historical person of Jesus was entangled "in the fray" of conflicting viewpoints and politics—and various communities vying for power. In this context, the historical Jesus comforted the weak and challenged the strong; Jesus' message was not passive or docile. And not all would agree that Jesus was completely non-violent. But all the while, these challenges come out of a being that was clearly full of caring, love and compassion.

The Hebrew sacred, then, is an unchanging being yet with the ability to redefine itself through the movement of history (compare it, if you will, to Troeltsch's understanding of Christianity, or to the notion of recursion in computer science.) Girard's focus, contrarily, seems somewhat limited and one-dimensional in comparison. It is an alluring perspective to be sure—we all want God to be an unchanging ideal of pure love and peace-- but Girard's view seems to deny the many faces of love, and the faces that may reveal themselves inside the mess and tensions that life sometimes is. For Girard, of course, the "mess" of this world—and even the purported "order" of this world—are of Satan. This Girardian position thus necessitates a divine that is external and 'other-worldly' casting out the Hebrew encounter with the divine in history. But the ability to encounter the sacred in history and in the midst of messy relationships and searches for identity is essential for harmonizing Girard with Judaism.

A Hebraicized Girardianism, therefore, must acknowledge the ambiguities inherent both in the Hebrew victim and in the sacred. The Hebrew text presents the struggles of humanity learning how to be in relationship with both each other and with God. This is no small task, and may endure for all of human history, and I maintain that Girard's theories are important for humanity (whether we can escape the cycle or not) to move forward with greater self-awareness. Girard's

theories of mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism are essential revelations through which to understand Hebrew Scriptures, ritual, history, and ourselves. But inside of Girard's structures, there must be some room to wrestle with the divine. Perhaps desire for God is most obvious, in fact, in one's willingness to wrestle with him, challenge him, or even, as Job, demand a response.

Issue #3: The Challenge of Particularism and the Reality of Anti-Semitism

The third primary challenge to our effort to make Girard functional for the Hebraic spirit and belief system is in the tension between particularistic and universalistic interpretations of the scriptures. This has been a point of tension inside of Jewish communities themselves. As Yosef Green states:

Throughout the millennia of its history, Judaism kept in focus its particularistic origin and function as well as its universal vision and thrust. No interpretation of Judaism that possesses any degree of authenticity can fail to recognize and share this recognition and appreciation of a Jew's specific group loyalty linked to an attachment to universal values. This balance, which is at the very core of Judaism, has nevertheless appeared as a stumbling block, if not an outright scandal, to some and a contradiction to others. The ineluctable fact is, however, that both elements in this balance have survived in Jewish consciousness and thought for millennia.⁴⁶⁶

What is at stake when this issue is cast in the light of Girardian studies is the Girardian tendency toward diminution (if not complete disregard) of the specific history of the Jewish people in favor of the mechanism Girard distinguishes in general. On the one hand, Girard's theories are emphatically supportive of the

⁴⁶⁶ Yosef Green, "Universalism and/or Particularism," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2002), accessed September 13, 2013, http://jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/301/301_green30.pdf.

historical and chronic oppression of the Jews (as well as any victimized group) in his distinguishing the Hebrew Bible as the first scripture that *hears* the voice of the victim. But criticisms from the Jewish community as well as others who speak from a post-colonial perspective are perturbed by Girard's absolutism.

In *I See Satan*, Girard calls up the Gospel of John—the oft-accused “anti-Semitic” gospel—to elucidate how he views the mechanism to be the crux of the gospel writer's words, and not any kind of anti-Jewish sentiment. I quote Girard's entire passage:

Our righteous indignation against John's Gospel has no basis. Jesus speaks the truth to his questioners: they have chosen rivalistic desire, and the long-term consequences will be disastrous. The fact that these people are Jews is much less important than those exegetes who are a little too eager to convict the Gospels of anti-Semitism.

After its mimetic definition of desire, the Gospel of John makes the consequence of this desire explicit—satanic murder. The impression that Christian animosity toward the Jews produced this text is due to our misunderstandings of its content, so we imagine a series of gratuitous insults. This effect of our ignorance is often compounded by a preconceived hostility toward the gospel message. We project our own resentment upon Christianity.⁴⁶⁷

Girard here is trying to convey the universal, humanistic message of the Gospels in his assertion that Jesus, in them, is speaking to *all* people. All people have to choose whether they will be a “child of God”, meaning one who renounces mimetic rivalry and violence, or a “child of the devil,” meaning one who casts out violence *by* violence (Satan with Satan). In a footnote to this section, Girard also indicates: “This distinction has nothing to do with Christians vs. Jews.”⁴⁶⁸

On one hand, Girard's interpretation is liberating in its release of the Gospels (and, in turn, much of Christianity) from anti-Semitism. If New

⁴⁶⁷ Girard, *I See Satan*, 42.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., footnote 3.

Testament scriptures have been used to fuel hatred of the Jews, Girard clearly indicates “we have already chosen the devil and his mimetic violence.”⁴⁶⁹ I would agree with Girard in asserting that “the devil” has indeed been chosen throughout history. It is possible to agree with Girard and say the onus for this, however, is not on the sacred texts, but on human misinterpretation of them. This would be a very refreshing “revelation.”

On the other hand, there is a real historical context in which these scriptures were written, not to mention real historical situations in which the anti-Semitism fueled by misunderstanding has manifested itself in human atrocities. The crying voice of the victim in the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, is a *Jewish* voice—at least in most cases—that has experienced severe triumphs and trials—trials that have lasted well beyond the era of the bible. Girard’s claim against the anti-Semitism of John (especially when the revelation of the Tanakh is declared as incomplete) is minimizing the particular circumstances of violence done unto these people, and the deep emotional anguish of their experience. The universal choice given by Jesus, as Girard understands it, is an important intellectual approach to understanding the problem of this violence. *Hearing the voice of actual victims*, (including those of Jesus and his followers that have been persecuted through history), however, provides emotional understanding, which is perhaps where real transformation in consciousness can occur. Girard himself declares this to be the decisive difference between the “pagan” sacred and the biblical witness: hearing the voice of the victim.

In addition to Girard’s transportation of his theories into the framework of Christianity (as discussed above), then, I propose that historical oversight is a large reason behind why the “Jewish” contribution has been wanting in the Girardian circles. Girard’s emphasis on structure, a kind of “dogma” if you will, over history, is in itself (if I could generalize) a seemingly more Christian approach to meaning and revelation, and this has enabled a full blossoming of elaborations and responses to Girard by faithful Christians. There is a natural

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.

structural resonance between Girard and Christianity. A paper delivered at this year's Colloquium on Violence and Religion (the academic organization devoted to Girard's thought), however, highlights the importance of particularism, history and identity for the Jewish people, over and above anything that might resemble a belief system, opening up whether we can find similar Girardian resonance with Judaism.

Newcomer to the organization, for example, is Rabbi Dr. Barbara Thiede from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Attending this year's colloquium (2013), she voices her own criticisms of Girard's work in light of her scholarly focus on Judaism and the history of anti-Semitism. In her paper "Girardian Scapegoats Twice Over? Nineteenth and Twentieth Century German Scholars Lynch the Jews (Again) in Pseudo-Academic Discourse on the First Century Alexandrian Pogrom," Dr. Thiede reflected a basic agreement with Girard's elucidation of the scapegoating dynamic within societies, but criticized the implication of Girard that scripture was written with the purpose of *revealing* this structure. Rather, Dr. Thiede contends that the scriptures (in her talk specifying the New Testament writings) were written out of a context of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating (i.e. between the early Christians and the Jews) rather than from an enlightened "revelatory" point of view. From Thiede's perspective, recognizing the rivalry with and scapegoating of Jews that is happening *in* and *underneath* the New Testament paints the picture of an oppressive thought regime that has been in place for centuries. For her, the real historic phenomenon of the hatred of the Jews – coming face-to-face with this historical reality of anti-Semitism—is an essential access point to coming to terms with violence. Taking the scriptures as a universal revelation of mimetic theory and scapegoating does have the capacity to undermine real, tragically violent, historical phenomena. The consequence of such a denial is scapegoating those already lynched.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁷⁰ Barbara Thiede, "Girardian Scapegoats Twice Over? Nineteenth and Twentieth Century German Scholars Lynch the Jews (Again) in Pseudo-Academic Discourse on the First

John Darr of Boston College, while he believes Girard's theory a major contribution across disciplines, makes a similar criticism of Girard's analysis of the New Testament more generally. In his article "Mimetic Desire, The Gospels, and Early Christianity," Darr observes that Girard, in his analysis of the Gospels,

fails to place these idiosyncratic documents in their appropriate cultural contexts in the late first century....The mimetic rivalry is not between the groups and persons in the passion story, but rather between rival Jewish sects that survived the catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem and scrambled to re-establish themselves in the wake of it. Christianity—the Christianity that produced the Gospels—was one of those Jewish groups; the other was pre-rabbinic Judaism, the heirs of the Pharisees. The object of the mimetic rivalry between them was the sacred tradition. Who is heir to the promises? To whom does the history of revelation, of salvation, belong? Who are now the elect of God?⁴⁷¹

Darr continues that the Gospels are "not pristine;" they are "former weapons in the struggle for cultural and religious heritage and identity."⁴⁷² Indeed, this time period is the fertile ground out of which both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity sprung; and scholars have made excellent demonstrations of how these two religions formed themselves side-by-side in parallel, as opposed to other thought models which would have Judaism the "father" of Christianity. Even within Judaism itself, therefore, one can glean from the religious literature of the Second Temple period how mimetic rivalry, even internal scapegoating was at play.⁴⁷³

Both Thiede and Darr's criticisms are noteworthy in this respect and read the scriptures through a politically sensitive lens. The importance of *history*, and

Century Alexandrian Pogrom," (presentation, Colloquium on Violence and Religion, University of Northern Iowa, July 11-14, 2013).

⁴⁷¹ John A. Darr, "Mimetic Desire, the Gospels, and Early Christianity: A Response to René Girard", *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 3 (1993), 363.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 364.

⁴⁷³ The Qumran scrolls, for example, make very clear the rivalry between the Essenes and both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Second Temple Judaism was a period rife with both internal and external mimetic conflicts.

the significance of *real* people, Jews or Christians, who have been stereotyped and persecuted unjustly are meaningful events. Who these people are matters. And for what reasons they were persecuted, for example, for their religion or ethnicity, *matters*. In the same vein, Girard has been duly criticized for ignoring women's voices in his analyses. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, for example, criticizes Girard's theory for failing to provide an "adequate critique of women as protagonists and victims."⁴⁷⁴ Kirk-Duggan follows in line with Thiede and Darr: she sustains some praise for Girard's theory, but also asserts its reductionist and limited perspective.

The specific history and struggle for the rights and liberties of any oppressed group can easily be undermined by a generic structuralist focus. For example, one could acknowledge one's own violence and participation in systemic oppression, but then what does one or even the world *do* with this revelation? On one hand, awareness of one's own participation in violence in and of itself is an enormous leap forward. On the other hand, the imbalance created by the violence of our hands has left an enormous emotional scar on various groups of people, which also needs to be addressed. Receiving the revelation of the mechanism is one thing; hearing the voice of its victims is another. Can Girard therefore really find a home within the tradition of Jewish interpretation that finds solace and identity in a unique history, and a meaningful history?

Fortunately, the Hebrew tendency toward ambiguity and dialectic is helpful here. I refer back to Rabbi Yosef Green who articulates the mainstream Jewish position between these nodes as follows:

If Jews believe that the Jewish people play a critical role in human history – namely, ushering in the messianic era – then remaining

⁴⁷⁴ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Gender, Violence, and Transformation in *The Color Purple*", in *Curing Violence*, eds. Mark Wallace and Theophus H. Smith (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), 266-86.

faithfully Jewish and doing one's best to transmit the Jewish heritage to future generations becomes a critical Jewish responsibility of cosmic dimensions. Once we accept this premise, then Jewish particularity mandates our universal concerns whereby we can be identified with all mankind.⁴⁷⁵

Jews' self-concern, therefore, is understood to be paradoxically for the sake of humankind, which is where Judaism straddles the particularist/universalist fence. And both sides of this fence are utterly important for the maintenance and repair of human relations.

The particularist viewpoint, by necessity, keeps one inside of a binary thought pattern, distinguishing an "us" and "them." This construction of "us" creates boundaries of special love –family or communal structures that are intentional, and that provide the most basic avenue for passing on affection, sustenance, nurturing and love. These boundaries are ones that provide safety and security as well, and we need these boundaries, too, as Girard would admit, to maintain differentiation and order in society. These aspects of particularism, one might say, are at heart of a well-functioning society.⁴⁷⁶ A family or community's own sense of beloved-ness also gives impetus to care for the outsider; it allows for boundaries to be negotiated properly, which might just help in the avoidance of violence across borders, so to speak. Internal harmony is a key for producing external, social and relational harmony. A focus on "us" and a healthy sense of identity may naturally open in hospitality to the "other." In certain cases, the particularist narrative is a way to separate from the "other", especially when there are hostile relations. Again, particularism enables a sense of safety, security, family, and "home." It is a platform from which one's voice can be presented to the world, if the world wants to hear.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ Green, no page number indicated.

⁴⁷⁶ This is an idea brought forth by Marc Gopin in his study of biblical remythicizing in *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁷⁷ I note here too, the necessity of healthy boundaries and wholeness for the practice of positive mimesis as discussed in chapter 5.

The universalistic interpretation, on the other hand, affirms that this particularist voice is relevant for all people. The universalistic interpretation takes into account that there is an interdependence of all people, and that violence to anyone in the human family is violence done also to us. The universalistic voice not only affirms that security in one's own identity leads to interindividual or inter-communal harmony, but even further to the idea that, in the end, "they" *are* "us." Nineveh was Israel before the covenant with Yahweh. The child sees in its parent's eyes what it is to become, and the parent sees who they were. Nineveh and Israel, parent and child--- each will have its own narrative, but the universal interpretation helps to bridge our socially-constructed alienation, and even, maybe, our outright conflict. The universal therefore emerges out of the particular in our ability to hear each other's *particular* voices. The voice of Judaism is, indeed one particular voice. So also is the call of Christianity. One cannot lose the differences between these two histories, traditions, and related persons and divinity, when absorbing them into one overarching structure. I maintain that it is out of the *encounter* between the national or communal and the universal—in this liminal state where the "I" realizes the "All"-- that the sacred is also revealed.

Following Victor Turner and others in his vein, I assert that the way of the world forces one out of this liminal space – this universal mindset. Though it is in this liminality where one may truly encounter the sacred, liminality can unfortunately make negotiating everyday life quite challenging. Similarly, understanding the universal schema of mimesis and scapegoating is essential to recognize, but this awareness perhaps does little to help one practically negotiate boundaries. Locating the sacred revelation as absolute, and pinning God down with certainty, (even if this God is the one of non-violence and love we truly desire), pushes aside a lot of the complexities one finds in the world, and thus fails to help us respond to them. This is why Girard has so much difficulty finding the solution to our entrapment in the world *in the world*. Girard's trajectory for the world, as he makes clear in *Battling to the End*, is a linear movement that will entail the breakdown of the violent cycle in which we currently exist, and a period

of chaos during which we have no structure to replace it. This, for Girard, will be the apocalypse and the beginning of a completely new existence. Though a full exploration of innermost mediation as a solution was explored in chapter five, apocalypse is clearly Girard's projected future for humanity.

We have seen in this dissertation a certain affinity with this Girardian notion of apocalypse, as the apocalyptic is also one trajectory within Judaic thought. Esther cannot escape the cycle of violence, the sailors of Jonah fail in the end, and certainly Jonah struggles with any movement toward non-violence. Even Ephraim becomes tainted with an overlay of violence to avert the crisis of the yetzer ha-ra. Girard declares in the first sentence of his Foreword to Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* that we are in a spiritual crisis today (a sentiment he expresses in numerous works).⁴⁷⁸ But are we really spiritually any worse off than in the past? Are we *really* in a crisis? It seems Girard is looking to create a crisis because of his desire for a change. But perhaps such drama is not necessary to move forward. Today's drama would be just one more crisis in a series of crises just like the ones we have encountered throughout the Hebrew Bible in this dissertation. Perhaps it is just a perceived crisis, and the remedy is actually in our power. The remedy must be more practical, though, and must integrate our small nationalisms into the larger structure that Girard brings to light.

If one manages to keep Girard's structure in mind (i.e. the universal structure common to all humanity), one can come back into the world of particulars, to learn how to negotiate boundaries and reconcile the "us" and the "them" differently. This job is messy. But certain successes have been attained.⁴⁷⁹ If scapegoating violence is indeed in our awareness, (as Girard maintains) and made forbidden, we are in essence forced to reckon with the notion of mimesis, and where it is that we, as a person or a nation, *lacks being*. *Being* may be equated, and often is, with symbols of land, food, identity,

⁴⁷⁸ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), xi.

⁴⁷⁹ One of the most poignant examples is the accomplishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa.

resources, and other goods. It may even be equated with a deity. But these are only the objects that deceive us and trap us in mimetic rivalry. Our own particularisms and individual stories must be juxtaposed with others in order to find those common expressions and places where we are deficient. This must be a joint effort.

In the end, I aver that it may not be our own violence that we are most afraid of confronting, as Girard asserts. Perhaps it is our own *lack of being* of which we are most afraid. Each individual, in the end, may have to reckon with this notion; and each nation collectively as well. The push for individual and communal identity is the access point to peeling off the layers of this onion, and our Hebrew Scriptures have revealed this process through Jonah's resistance to Nineveh, and Haman and Mordecai's resistance to each other. The projected future, therefore, may not be a Girardian apocalypse of unleashed violence. It may be each person's and each nation's stark confrontation with their own emptiness. Violence is really nothing more than camouflage for this deep fear of emptiness. And no amount of scapegoats will be able to fill this void. If innermost mediation or positive mimesis is ever going to take hold, it is precisely this emptiness that we will need to reckon with, too. Humanity must learn to access the deep well of *being* that is our inheritance. And what may then happen is perhaps nothing more than a humble approach to communicating across personal and national boundaries *out of* the knowledge that we are all in the same. The sacred, according to the Hebrew mind, is within this kind of dialogue.

Hebrew particularism must be considered, in the end, as of essential importance. It is in the personal, particularistic stories that one begins to learn that these stories are all interconnected. Only by sharing these stories across borders might it be realized that the "us" narratives intensely affect the "them" narratives, and may even be stories of striking similarity. But each particularist story must be heard and acknowledged; each victim's narrative needs to be played out in order to deal with revelation on an emotional and not just intellectual level. A Hebraicized Girardianism, therefore, must not overlook the

victim (and further scapegoat the scapegoated), for the sake of the mechanism. It must integrate each voice in reconciliation. This push for a remedy has been put on Girard many times over the past 30 years (by this author here, too), and I believe this comes from the need to negotiate and include the voices of those who have been the subjects of persecution. We cannot just acknowledge, for the Hebraic spirit and others, that scapegoating is a violent mechanism in which we are trapped. The violent mechanism has caused a lot of pain in the world. Like Dante's entertaining *Inferno*, violence just distracts us like a soap opera from a very deep yearning to be and be heard. May we each find and speak our authentic voice, and begin to truly listen to each other and heal.

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